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Dante after Auschwitz: Holocaust Narratives and the Commedia

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ABSTRACT

The term "Holocaust" implies a narrative of religious sacrifice: the impulse to construct coherent stories out of the complex of events and experiences in the ghettoes and death camps springs from a desire to find meaning in what might otherwise seem meaningless. Recalling Dante's quest to comprehend a European social order gone astray, three prominent framers of Holocaust narratives in the post-War era became deeply engaged with the allegorical project of the *Commedia*. This thesis examines Primo Levi's typological use of *Inferno* in his memoir *Se Questo È un Uomo* (1948); Andrzej Wajda's political engagement with *Purgatorio* in his film *Kanał* (1956); and Peter Weiss's judicial preoccupation with *Paradiso* in his play *Die Ermittlung* (1965). Their works reveal not only how Dantean allegory can function as an interpretive tool for understanding Holocaust narratives but also how modern understandings of the *Commedia* have been expanded by their readings of it.

Key words: allegory, Andrzej Wajda, Auschwitz, contrapasso, Dante Alighieri, Holocaust, justice, Peter Weiss, Primo Levi, resistance literature, testimony, Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,

DEDICATION

To Michelle and Kim
What we have shared has given me the
inspiration to always look for the silver lining
and to face every situation with kindness and empathy.
I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

On the Brink of an Abyss

I

Primo Levi leads us into his harrowing memoir of the Holocaust, *Se Questo È un Uomo*, not (as we might expect) from the beginning of his life, with a calm account of the years leading up to the Nazi persecutions, but with a jolt *in medias res*, thrusting us with himself and his fellow Jews into the pitiless enclosure of the wagons bound for Auschwitz. Like the captives, we suddenly lose our citizenship in the world of the familiar and become unfamiliar to ourselves, dehumanized, mere cargo en route to "nulla." The initiatory experience of the wagons is described

> Proprio cosí, punto per punto: vagoni merci, chiusi dall'esterno, e dentro uomini donne bambini, compressi senza pietà, come merce di dozzina, in viaggio verso il nulla, in viaggio all'ingiú, verso il fondo. Questa volta dentro siamo noi. (*Se Questo* 14)
>
> [Exactly like this, detail for detail: goods wagons closed from the outside, with men, women and children pressed together without pity, like cheap merchandise, for a journey towards nothingness, a journey down there, towards the bottom. This time it is us who are inside.] (Woolf 16-7)[1]

Strategically merged in the expansive pronouns of Levi's punctilious narration are "they" who were forced into the wagons, forced to become insiders to the subsequent horrors of the camps, and "we" who are looking back at them from a safe historical distance – most of us as horrified outsiders—readers without borders, as it were, who have placed ourselves under his authorial guidance and are freely entering into an intimate

[1] All English translations of *Se Questo È un Uomo* are from: Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz: A Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). The Roman numerals following "Woolf" refer to the page number(s) on which the excerpted passages appear in the translation. Quotations from the original Italian text will be cited with the abbreviation *Se Questo* followed by the page number(s) in Roman numerals.

understanding of their experiences. We should not be surprised if this journey "towards the bottom" feels like a retracing of allegorical steps. The feeling is more than the result of obsessive historical retrospection or revisionism. It is preeminently a literary effect, the outcome of Levi's relentless typological engagement with Dante.

The confining interiority of the wagons clearly functions as Levi's Limbo. Just as Dante's Limbo is densely populated—a "selva di spiriti spessi' [wood of thronging spirits] (*Inferno* 4.66)[2] —so the wagons are packed with people, forced by their sheer numbers rather than by any sense of social formality or moral rectitude to stand upright as they are conveyed towards ghostly erasure by the mechanism of a terrible unseen power. Levi's asyndeton "uomini donne bambini" aptly evokes the dire compression of the doomed population into a tiny space, even as it recalls and reverses the order of Dante's more expansive phrasing "d'infanti e di femmine e di viri" [of infants and of women and of men] (*Inf.* 4.30) which had poignantly revealed to the pilgrim-poet the careful preservation of classical social hierarchies based on gender and age among the vast and varied crowds of the First Circle. The loss of connecting words in Levi's hasty demographic survey seems to anticipate the destruction of all such ancient hierarchical connections, heralding the further reduction of the captive men-women-children into a faceless herd, a compacted heap. The presence of "bambini" in the crowded wagons is reported almost offhandedly, as a simple matter of fact, as if it were not an especially appalling sight to Levi at the time of his capture and deportation. In this respect he also resembles Dante-pilgrim, whose sighting of the unbaptized babies in Limbo is passed

[2] All quotations and translations from the *Commedia* are drawn from the Hollander edition (2000-2007). In citing Dante's works throughout this volume, I have followed the list of abbreviated titles established by Richard Lansing in *The Dante Encyclopedia* (2000), ix. For example: *Inferno* (*Inf.*); *Purgatorio* (*Purg.*); *Paradiso* (*Par.*). Since the quotations and translations appear within the same volume, and both as poetry, I will only be citing the quotation once by line number.

over as soon as it hits his consciousness, giving rise at the time to no rebellious lamentations or agonized theodicies. Having reached "la valle d'abisso dolorosa / che 'ntrono accoglie d'infiniti guai" [upon the brink of an abyss of suffering / filled with the roar of endless woe] (*Inf.* 4.8-9), both authors leave us laconically on edge, rhetorically unsettled by what is *not* said about the coming "journey down there."

Levi's concern with detail, with what *is* described about the "journey down there," is also shared by Dante in his observations of Limbo. Dante explains to the reader that he gazes intently around Limbo to identify his location (*Inf.* 4.5-6). Since Dante-poet is telling the reader this, he intends the gaze to serve as a way to document at a later time what he has seen, just as Levi tells the reader that his description is "proprio cosí, punto per punto." This concern with detail is also demonstrated through Levi's use of the first-person plural to include himself in the hoard of people being loaded into the goods wagons. Dante-poet similarly uses the first-person plural for the same inclusion in the journey (*Inf.* 1.1). Levi and Dante are both descending to commence their journeys and, as writers, they speak in the first person in order to include themselves in the ordeal about which they are going to write. This inclusion allows Levi license to recall his own Limbo-like experiences of being trapped in the wagons headed towards Auschwitz. Unlike the souls in Limbo who remain imprisoned there, Levi is not stationary; the wagons are hurtling forward towards internment, much like Charon's boat which ferries the condemned souls across the river to their assigned circles of punishment (*Inf.* 3.82-111). Levi has conflated these two episodes from *Inferno* in a manner that casts him in the double role of a virtuous shade in Limbo and a damned soul en route to deeper torments in the Abyss.

Since Levi is writing from "dentro" and the wagons are identified with Limbo, he repopulates this Dantean area with Hebrews (before the Harrowing of Hell the Hebrew worthies resided in Limbo). Levi returns the Hebrews to this place where the original Hebrew worthies were not to be condemned but to wait for deliverance. Ironically, for Levi's Hebrews, there will be no deliverance to Heaven, only condemnation and judgment on the ramps of Auschwitz. Levi includes himself inside these wagons, inside Limbo waiting for deliverance, but then ironically excludes the wagons (in their typological relationship to Charon's boat) from salvation. In *Inferno* 3, from the viewpoint of Dante-pilgrim, Charon seems to be a judgmental officer in the infernal chain of command and not a member of the Damned himself. However, as a demon, he is no less damned than the shades in his boat. In so far as he corresponds to the Nazi drivers, his demonic status effectively demonizes them. Levi's explicit inclusion of himself inside the wagon[3] also implicitly suggests the view outside of the wagon, the vantage-point of the judge, in his case the Nazis on the ramp. The condemned souls in *Inferno* are there because of their sins, however, whereas the Jews find themselves in the similar situation for reasons that seem incomprehensible to them.

This ironic inclusion which also implies exclusion surfaces from a typological connection to Dante's *Inferno*. As an allegorist, Dante also enriches the reader's experience by using ironic binaries, which can be revealed through a meditation of *Inferno* 4. One ironic binary is that of darkness and light. Here, light means both the physical sensation and intelligence and darkness means either the absence of light or spiritual darkness. Dante has just begun his journey and is guided through Hell because

[3] Levi also identifies with Dante-poet however as he also returns and writes of his journey through his Hell—Auschwitz.

he has strayed from the right path, from the path of religious correctness. Limbo is his introduction to Hell and he is greeted by the great authors who lived and died before Christ's crucifixion. Dante, as a poet, is first introduced to other poets whose works he would not only know well but also revere (and does revere as his allusions to them confirm). These souls are not raised to Purgatory or Paradise but are condemned to Inferno for all eternity. The eclipsing of their mental acuity because of spiritual darkness is heightened also by the presence of the unbaptized babies. Like the pilgrim, the reader has to contend with the horrific image of babies in Hell and also the irony of the noble poets appearing trapped in the same location as these inarticulate innocents. The most informative example of this binary is Virgil. He comes to rescue Dante from the Dark Wood and tells him that since he has been a guide previously, he will escort Dante through the Inferno. While Dante-pilgrim and Virgil are unaware of this in *Inferno* 4, Virgil will not be harrowed from Hell after his duty as guide has finished. His ignorance of Christianity, an accident of his birth date, tragically condemns him to internal (as well as eternal) exile as a literally "marginalized" shade in Limbo.

The second binary entails inclusion and exclusion. Dante makes the reader aware of it by positioning Limbo inside Hell yet also outside the circles of corporeal torment. Dante-pilgrim's initial state in *Inferno* 4 is of a suspended consciousness; he is asleep. Dante-poet describes his pilgrim self waking up to a large thunderclap (1-3). The chaotic masses he describes upon first hearing the souls make it hard to understand how he could have fallen asleep at all. Dante is inside Limbo but seems to be on the outside, unaffected originally by the conditions of Limbo but soon growing aware of the psychological torment of its inhabitants. His insider/outsider status in the First Circle is further intensified by what Virgil has told him while they were both outside the Gate of Hell:

from Beatrice's instructions to his guide he knows that he is impelled by higher powers to enter into Limbo en route to the Abyss.

The souls in Limbo are not tortured by demons like the Damned in the lower circles of Hell (*Inf.* 4.40-2). The First Circle is also the location of the only known (and witnessed) rescue of souls from Hell; the pilgrim learns that Virgil has seen Christ during the Harrowing when the Hebrew worthies were removed from Limbo. Virgil is also trapped in the middle of this binary. While he is presented as the wise guide who is able to leave his circle with Dante, the only one to do so since the Harrowing, he is unable to remain distant from Limbo and returns even though he believes there is a possibility for his release. Dante-poet recognizes his own unique situation when he notes that Dante-pilgrim is first accepted as one of the great poets only to be led beyond them into the depths of Hell (*Inf.* 4.148-50). He includes himself originally within the elite company of these poets only to exclude himself by departing from them, which serves to highlight the contrast between inside and outside Limbo. As a poet writing of his own pilgrimage, Dante himself participates in the inclusion and exclusion binary. While Dante-pilgrim experiences the journey, it is Dante-poet who writes of this experience. Both characters are Dante but they are not identical: Dante-poet has experienced the entire afterlife and reshaped his relation to the world accordingly, while Dante-pilgrim has not. The project of the *Commedia*, in part, is to bring these two Dantes together, to resolve the tension between the wayward pilgrim and the Poet who is out to reform the World.

These Dantean ironies are transferable to the Holocaust[4] as demonstrated through an analysis of how these binaries function in *Se Questo È un Uomo*. The first binary, the

[4] For this project the term "Holocaust" will be used in a broadly inclusive sense to refer not only to the genocide of approximately six million European Jews under the Third Reich but also to the persecution of

opposition of darkness and light, plays out in Levi's allegorical association of physical illumination with mental acuity. Levi describes being enclosed in the darkness of the goods wagon, which has no windows and no way of escape. The people with whom he is travelling share only the common characteristic of being Jewish prisoners of the Nazi regime. While he is an educated man, that intelligence is rendered useless in the goods wagon—survival depends not on mental capabilities but on physical strength. Surrounded by "uomini donne bambini," the Jews sealed in the wagons have no choice but to coexist. Like the great intellectuals who are humiliated in Limbo by having to keep company with mere babies amid the thronging masses of male and female shades, Levi is unable to reconcile his status as an educated man with the humble presence of mothers and babies in the wagons.

The darkness Dante describes in *Inferno* 4, however, is not the same darkness implied by Levi's sinister phrase "viaggio verso il nulla." The Jews are being taken to Auschwitz in order to be destroyed. The Nazis want to remove Jews from history and so no longer treat them like human beings: they are packed into goods wagons like objects to be used and discarded. This dehumanization of the Jews is demonstrated through the mercantile language present in Levi's account of the deportation but not in the language of *Inferno* 4. Not only does Levi describe the wagons as "vagoni merci" but he also describes himself and the other Jews "come merce di dozzina." While Dante describes a darkness, he certainly does not mean that there is nothing in Limbo, but that the darkness prevents him from seeing the landscape and inhabitants there. Levi's change of diction in

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millions more in various other groups targeted by the Nazis during World War II (e.g. disabled persons, homosexuals, Romani, Sinti, Soviet prisoners-of-war, Jehovah's Witnesses, non-Jewish Europeans who lived in fear of imprisonment, torture, or execution because of their efforts to resist Hitler's genocidal policies). Under this definition, a conservative estimate of the total number of victims is around twelve million.

the context of the Dantean binary between darkness and light makes the description of his trip to Auschwitz horrific because the reader realizes that unlike the ghosts in Limbo, he is a living soul scheduled for complete erasure from the human race. The souls in *Inferno* are treated as intelligent beings, even though they are condemned to eternal damnation.

While the deportations to Auschwitz have been described many times by various survivors, what Levi as writer would know is that the trip to Auschwitz (if survived) was relatively mild compared to survival within the camp. While Levi experiences horrors he could never imagine within the wagon, the state of waiting to arrive at Auschwitz is eerily similar to Dante's surprise after leaving Limbo and entering Hell proper where he passes out after witnessing the first infernal punishment (*Inf.* 5.142). Just as Dante is described as sleeping at the beginning of *Inferno* 4 and his entrance is therefore forced, the trip in the goods wagon is also forced. Levi has no choice but to accept his deportation and begin his journey, unaware of whether he will survive or not. Though the absence of consciousness Dante describes is not mentioned explicitly in Levi's narrative, a Holocaust survivor could sympathize with that condition: the deportations were widely discussed, rumours of the death camps surfaced continually, and there were even a few escapees of death camps. Usually the Jews went to their scheduled deaths with an eerie orderliness. There is no chaos at the train tracks when the Jews are loaded into the goods wagons, "soltanto uno stupor profondo" (*Se Questo* 14) [only a profound amazement] (Woolf 16). While Dante's account of the pilgrim's unconscious entrance into the Inferno brings to the fore the infernal irony of his insider/outsider status, Levi's testimony about the stupefied condition of the Jews reveals their utter exclusion from the social order established to realize (and to conceal) the murderous intentions of the Nazis.

By including Dante-pilgrim in the circle of great poets only to have him break away from their company, Dante-poet demonstrates his unique position as the poet who will surpass the works of those he has just met. Levi notes that, of the forty-five people in his wagon, "quattro soltanto hanno rivisto le loro case" (*Se Questo* 15) [only four saw their homes again] (Woolf 18). The number four in this context seems especially significant. While Levi is echoing *Inferno* 4 in the description of his journey, he seems to include himself not as one of the two poets who depart from the group of six, but as one of the four poets who remain in Limbo. In Levi's case, remaining as one of four ironically portends his deliverance since these are the four Jews who ultimately survive. Yet from the guilt-ridden perspective of a survivor, inclusion in such a group can strangely feel like an exclusion from the infernal life of the majority of Jews in the camps. Levi returns from Auschwitz and writes *Se Questo È un Uomo* in order to tell the world what has happened to him, just as Dante returns and writes the *Commedia* as a testimony of his pilgrimage. Yet as a survivor Levi is deeply conscious of his position in a tiny minority lacking guidance on how to navigate through their memories of survival. Dante has divine inspiration and Virgil as his guide. Levi's memoir redeploys the Dantean binary of inclusion and exclusion through ironic reversals of the typological correspondences to events and characters in *Inferno* 3-4 to reveal how a Holocaust survivor would feel shockingly without supernatural guidance and would therefore be inclined to identify himself with the abandoned poets rather than with Dante-pilgrim. Whereas Dante uses the first-person singular to denote his unique position of sole "survivor," Levi uses the first-person plural instead. While Levi makes note that "questa volta dentro siamo noi" and therefore includes himself within the wagon, he also excludes himself from the wagon by being one of the four survivors.

Perhaps by identifying himself with one of four left behind, Levi also parallels his authorial position with Virgil's ironic placement in Limbo. Though Virgil is normally restricted to Limbo, Beatrice's intervention permits him to move freely through the Inferno and up Mount Purgatory with Dante. When Beatrice returns at the top of the mountain, Virgil once again "has disappeared" to the First Circle. While he is a knowing guide he is still unable to escape damnation. In light of Virgil's return to Limbo, did Levi as a survivor see himself in the role of the knowing guide who is ultimately entrapped in his Limbo-like memories of Auschwitz? When Levi came to write *Se Questo È un Uomo* from his home after the war, had he really escaped his experiences,[5] or was he thrown back into Limbo the moment his knowledge became "useless" or a better guide came along? Dante uses the inclusion/exclusion binary to define his uniquely privileged position as the protagonist and author of the *Commedia*. By not doing the same, Levi suggests that his status as a Holocaust survivor is not a privileged position but an unfortunate result of a failed Nazi regime. Perhaps he is also suggesting that it is difficult to be a testimonial author without being trapped anew in the contents of the testimony.

Another reason for Levi's ironic cancellation of his identification with Dante is the extreme contrast between the totalizing perspective adopted by the poet of the *Commedia*, and the inevitably partial viewpoint of a survivor of the Holocaust. As a survivor, Levi did not experience everything possible in the camps. Aside from not experiencing the gas chambers personally, he was never a member of the *Sonderkommando*.[6] When Dante excludes himself from the group of poets in which he

[5] Elie Wiesel suggests that while Primo Levi lived for forty years after surviving Auschwitz, he never left Auschwitz and his death was a "death in Auschwitz forty years later" (Cicioni 171).
[6] These unfortunate Jews were those who witnessed the murder in the gas chambers and were responsible for removing the dead bodies from the chambers to the crematoria for burning.

has been included, he is effectively proclaiming his access to the fullness of the Truth as opposed to their narrowly pagan glimpses of it: only he can map out the entire abyss of Hell and chart the heights of Purgatory and Paradise beyond it. Levi is not the only witness who can testify to the horrors of the camps, the full experience of which can only be pieced together gradually from the different viewpoints of those survivors who are willing to record their fragmentary memories and far-from-partial reflections.

While Levi's ironic redeployment of Dantean binaries helps to define his dual role as survivor/author against the universalizing precedent of the pilgrim/poet of the *Commedia*, allusions to the Sacred Poem in Holocaust narratives are not always as explicit as Levi's or as useful in providing guidance to understanding (let alone answering) the overwhelming questions facing the survivors. Levi sees a clear relationship between himself, his narrative, and the *Commedia*, but that very clarity underscores the problematic of projecting the *Commedia* onto a Holocaust narrative. Immediately problematic is the cultural gulf separating the Poet's medieval universe from the ever-provisional world of modernity. Dante-poet is a Christian medieval poet looking to help save Christian souls from eternal damnation, not only in his own time period but also for future Christian souls. His experience is deeply personalized because he is chosen for a specific reason and given a specific purpose. Levi is a Jewish Holocaust survivor looking to tell his story because of a need to write[7] in order to warn the world that another Holocaust is possible. Also, Dante deals with eternity while Levi deals with a specific twentieth-century event. Dante is concerned with Christian souls but Levi is concerned with all who can heed his warning. Both writers oscillate between authorial

[7] Tony Judt explains that *Se Questo È Un Uomo* has "an urgent, imperative present tense, telling the reader what must be known" (50).

positions within and beyond their narratives, but for different political and psychological reasons. Even though Dante and Levi use their texts as warnings, are the goals similar enough to warrant a comparison between their projects? Is Dante ultimately more of an impediment than an impetus to the collective project of telling the truth about the Holocaust in narrative form?

II

The appeal of the *Commedia* to narrators of the Holocaust can be linked to Dante's rhetorical battle with the inability to express the events he describes. Confronted almost constantly with phenomena he struggles to describe to the reader, Dante still manages to provide an account of them through the allegorical use of typological parallels and metaphorical images. At the beginning of *Inferno* the poet-pilgrim is unsure of himself and his ability to embark on the pilgrimage, but by the end of *Paradiso* he has expanded his creative powers, strengthened his will, and clarified his vision so that he can embark on the daunting project of writing the *Commedia*. He is confident that he can describe the incredible things he sees on his journey. Levi similarly begins from a position of incredulity (*Se Questo* 35). Though he is recording his own experiences and observations of the Holocaust, he is still unable to comprehend them fully and worries that he will be unable to convince his readers that he is telling the truth. Is Dante-poet's ability in the *Commedia* to empower his own voice by transcending the ineffability topos a rhetorical strategy open to anyone trying to express the inexpressible horrors of the Holocaust?

Dantean allegory expands and clarifies metaphoric images even as it transfers them into narrative: a creative process that would surely appeal to authors struggling to bring clarity and coherent meaning to the muddle of events loosely gathered together as "the Holocaust" (an already allegorical label). Levi, Wajda and Weiss all engage

typologically with the *Commedia* and this engagement enhances the meaning of their experiences and their works as they present them to the reader or viewer. For witnesses to the incomprehensibility and seemingly unprecedented horror of the Holocaust, the discovery in Dante of comparably bizarre or horrifying experiences would no doubt offer reassurance that the project of recording experiences *de profundis* was at least possible. If the extraordinary events in the *Commedia* can be understood allegorically then maybe the perplexities of the Holocaust might be rendered intelligible through allusive narration. In this study I will analyze how three allegorists of the Holocaust—Primo Levi, Andrzej Wajda, and Peter Weiss—turned to the *Commedia* as a model for rendering the inexpressible in persuasive words and images and the incomprehensible in powerfully clear structures of meaning.

The engagement between the *Commedia* and Holocaust narratives does not just move from the *Commedia* to the other narrative. The Holocaust narratives also, in their typological engagements with the *Commedia*, inform the reader's modern understanding of the medieval poem. At the start of the third cantica Dante explains that he desires his poem to be read by future generations and to be all encompassing, hoping that "poca favilla gran fiamma seconda" [a great flame follows a little spark] (*Par*. 1.34). He intends the *Commedia* to be the "poca favilla" which will ignite a "gran fiamma" of understanding and desire to learn more about the afterlife through which he travels. The narratives that allude to the *Commedia* then reshape how the poem is reread, as if each new text presented to the *Commedia* provides new material for its expansive flame. These works make use of Dante in many ways and this in turn helps the reader return to the *Commedia* with an expanded understanding of the poem. How do the Holocaust

narratives make use of different sections of the *Commedia* and how do these uses help to expand Dante's allegories of human nature, political order, and retributive justice?

III

In the following chapters, I will seek answers to these questions by examining three Holocaust narratives that address Dantean allegory from three very different authorial positions. Levi's method of identifying and mirroring ironic binaries from the *Inferno* has already been introduced. As a Holocaust memoirist, he has a close identification not only with the pilgrim but also with the poet because both discuss events they have experienced first-hand. His projection of the Inferno onto Auschwitz springs from his deep emotional connection with Dante as the supreme poet of exile and marginalization.

Andrzej Wajda's film *Kanał* belongs to the genres of War and Suspense. Very different from Levi, Wajda, as a Christian Pole, had no direct experiences with the *Lager* but did assist the large resistance movement in Poland before being exiled for his involvement. Wajda draws a fairly obvious topographic analogy between the Dantean underworld and the sewers leading down and away from Warsaw, but beyond that, as if gazing at the obscure outline of Purgatory in the distance, he works out a strong political connection between the escaping prisoners and the souls in the second cantica. The political concepts that dominate Dante's writing, as Joan M. Ferrante points out,

> are the role of the empire and of the church in secular government, particularly in Italy, the relations between independent city-states or separate kingdoms and the empire, the destructive roles played by France and Florence, the divisive factionalism of political parties, Black and White Guelphs, Guelphs and Ghibellines, the corruption of the papacy and the papal curia, and the ideal of Rome. (181)

As a political poet Dante was preoccupied with the separation of Church and Empire, the factionalizing discord of the Italian city-states, and the urgent need to define an ideally just system of government. He introduces these concerns into the *Commedia* in order for medieval Italy to confront its political and moral crises and to help solve them before they caused complete destruction. Wajda similarly uses his allegorical film-narratives to comment on the political situation in Poland. He sees Poland as both a political and spiritual state, just as Dante saw Italy in its ideal state as a concord of imperial and ecclesiastical powers. Janina Falkowska notes that "Wajda sees Polish identity as linked to the spiritual perception of the nation's essence and to its heroic past. He introduces the issues of responsibility, of the fight for freedom and honor, each important for the ultimate defining of national identity" (52). To become an ideal nation Poland must unite its spiritual and political energies, which is precisely what Dante urged Italy to do in his meditations on the proper relation between Pope and Emperor.

When Wajda was asked to speak about social progress and what Poland means to him, he made clear his belief that social progress can only come from an independent nation and that is why through his films he "endeavour[s] to widen the scope of liberty, so that people may express their real hopes and desires" (Karpiński 13). His desires for Poland stem from a very strong identification with his nation and with his hope for Poland on the world stage. When asked what Poland meant to him, he responded:

> Everything. My past and my future. It is the landscape that I see from my window, it is the nation's history and its art, past and future. I want to take part in something vital. I have dreamt of this all my life; it is what I have always wanted. I have always believed that Poland occupied an important place on the European map and that Poland counts. Therefore, as a Pole, I am able to take part in significant and crucial events. (Karpiński 13)

Wajda hopes Poland will be liberated from any form of political control and be allowed to become an independent nation. He believes this political and national independence is only achievable if every individual Pole who cares for Poland wishes the same. He wants everyone to know that Poland occupies "an important place on the European map and that Poland counts." Dante expressed similar beliefs about Italy in *Purgatorio*, the Holy Mountain being the only one of his three realms positioned in the surface of the earth within the temporal range of human history. Through hope and hard work the souls of Purgatory purge their sins in order to reunite in the Heavenly Kingdom where harmony is found. Wajda's hopes for Poland as an independent and harmonious nation neatly dovetail with Dante's purgatorial recovery of hope for his "serva Italia" [Italy enslaved] (*Purg*. 6.76).

Peter Weiss also draws inspiration from Dante's political activism. Just as Dante was "a European adapting to permanent exile from Florence under the threat of execution [Weiss was] exiled to Sweden [under] the threat of burning at the concentration camps" (Pike 66). Both Weiss and Dante must confront the political systems that have forced them to flee their homes in order to escape death. Dante's ability to mediate between exclusion and inclusion helps him search for these answers. Dante's pilgrimage through the afterlife culminates in political illumination about the ideal state, and as a consequence he is able to understand his exile from a position not of a dispirited exile but of a committed activist. Rather than the afterlife, Weiss is dealing with an aftermath—specifically the unfolding of his career amid the tumult of post-War Germany. In his documentary drama *Die Ermittlung*, he backgrounds the crisis of his own exile in order to concentrate on the quest for justice undertaken by the survivors of Auschwitz. His dramatic "investigation" of their emotional as well as judicial trials implicitly records his

own struggle to find answers to the conundrums of the Third Reich. Reflecting on the broad cultural significance of *der Auschwitz-Prozess*, Rebecca Wittmann asks the following questions:

> But what exactly is it that came to pass here? The civilized world's settling of accounts with Hitler's murder system? A moral and political-lesson, meant for those who lived during the era of Auschwitz who went far in the art of repression, and a signal of deterrence for the generation that followed? A historical investigation in which, in a courtroom, stroke by stroke, a narrowly circumscribed chapter of German history was recorded by living human beings? The wish itself [that the trial could serve these functions] suggests that the Auschwitz Trial could have been all this. (250-1)

The trials fail to be what the spectators in the courtroom hope it will be. Wittmann notes that "the Auschwitz Trial *could* have been all this," which suggests that in practice, it failed to be these things. It was therefore not successful as "a moral and political-lesson" or "a historical investigation in which . . . a narrowly circumscribed chapter of German history was recorded by living human beings." *Die Ermittlung* reached a larger audience than the spectators of the trials did, and Weiss could therefore use his play to spread these messages in the aftermath of the failure of the German justice system. Dante views the political system of Italy as failing and therefore uses his poem not only to proclaim the failure but also to help the people of Italy make it a stronger nation. Only in Paradise can Dante attain the clarity required to understand his earthly exile in its universal context instead relying on the divine justice found there to condemn those deserving of it on Earth. Dante must rely on God's grace and providential view of history in order to understand the injustice behind his exile. While the answers to the broad questions raised by the trials remain provisional, Weiss draws inspiration from *Paradiso* to sustain his investigative project of discovering a larger justice system than the German courts for determining the guilt of the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Like Dante-poet, Weiss embarks on his investigation of the justice system for the benefit of all humanity now and in the future—not just for his contemporaries in Europe. One critic notes that Weiss deliberately pierces the fourth wall in the theatre in order to shift the dramatic focus

> from the Auschwitz trial to the role of the audience during the trial. [The piercing of the fourth wall] signaled not only that ordinary Germans had sat idly by during the Holocaust but also that they continued to be uninvolved witnesses to the debate over Holocaust responsibility. (Windham 211)

His motivation for writing *Die Ermittlung* is to involve the uninvolved—the disengaged or simply indifferent majority—in what had hitherto been the intense judiciary concerns of a tiny minority of defendants and witnesses. Observing that *der Auschwitz-Prozess* had little lasting effect on the attitudes of post-War Germans towards the Holocaust, Weiss hoped his play would help to prevent such horrific events in the future. Wittmann noted that "most people saw the grisly crimes of the sadistic defendants as if they were part of a macabre fantasy world—'Dante's Inferno,' as Martin Walser described it—and did not make a connection between the perpetrators on trial, the harmless neighbours living peacefully beside them, and their own role in the Nazi past" (247). The only way for Weiss to understand his own exile lay in finding out how to make the public aware that they had also participated in the Nazi past and that a "connection between the perpetrators on trial, the harmless neighbours living peacefully beside them" needed to be made in order to correct the past.

Two ordering principles have guided my readings of Levi, Wajda, and Weiss. First, I have dealt with their works in chronological order according to date of publication. Second, following the sequence of cantiche in the *Commedia*, I have devoted my first chapter to Levi because of his intense engagement with *Inferno*; my second

chapter to Wajda because of his political investment in *Purgatorio*; and my third chapter to Weiss because of his ethical alignment with *Paradiso*. I hope that as readers move through this study they will have a sense of the journey that each of these three modern allegorists had to take in their struggle to narrate the Holocaust. It is a journey patterned, at least in part, on the long route back to the "verace via" [true way] (*Inf.* 1.12) once abandoned by Dante-poet in the Dark Wood but recovered by Dante-poet in the Empyrean.

CHAPTER ONE

The Demolition of a Condemned Man: Primo Levi's *Se Questo È un Uomo* and Dante's *Inferno*

During a moment of reprieve[8] in Auschwitz, Primo Levi reports that he recited as much of *Inferno* 26 as he could remember to a young Frenchman named Jean. Jean asks Levi to teach him some Italian and Levi chooses to instruct him in Dante's Florentine dialect. Just as the reader is transported to the late Middle Ages in Hell to imagine the conversation between Ulysses and Dante, Levi and Jean escape for an instant, distancing themselves both mentally and historically from the *Lager*. Only at this moment does Levi verbalize the typological engagement, word for word, that he feels with Dante. Levi feels rushed, pressured to provide Jean with complex personal answers to two deceptively simple questions: "Chi è Dante? Che cosa è la Commedia?" (*Se Questo* 101) [Who is Dante? What is the Comedy?] (Woolf 112). For Levi this episode in Auschwitz becomes the moment of explicit connection between his horrific experiences and Dante's infernal journey, though implicit references to Dante's *Inferno* occur much earlier in *Se Questo È un Uomo*. As Levi watches everyone unloaded at the rail station in Auschwitz he immediately realizes that in Auschwitz "non è un comando, non è regolamento questo: si vede bene che è una piccola iniziativa privata del nostro caronte. La cosa suscita in noi collera e riso e uno strano sollievo" (*Se Questo* 18) [There is no order, no regulation: it is obvious that it is a small private initiative of our Charon. The matter stirs us to anger and laughter and brings relief] (Woolf 21). Charon, the ferryman of Hell, conveys the

[8] By a moment of reprieve, I mean that Jean and Levi were able to stop work in order to get the soup from the kitchen for lunch. I am not suggesting that at any point during his time in the camps was Levi able to rest and to make a full escape, even mentally, from the *Lager*.

Damned to the far shore of Acheron where they will fall to their appropriate circles, just as on the ramps the Jews are told where to go without care for their well-being. Levi and the members of his transport are introduced to their own "caronte" and the bathos generated by the allusion provokes a salutary mixture of "collera e riso." In *Inferno* 3, when Dante meets Charon, the emotional responses are not from the pilgrim but from the demonic pilot and the damned souls awaiting transport in his bark. Virgil must intercede to calm their passions:

> . . . "Caron, non ti crucciare:
> vuolsi così colà dove si puote
> ciò che si vuole, e più non dimandare."
>
> Quinci fuor quete le lanose gote
> al nocchier de la livida palude,
> che 'ntorno a li occhi avea di fiamme rote.
>
> Ma quell'anime, ch'eran lasse e nude,
> cangiar colore e dibattero i denti,
> ratto che 'nteser le parole crude.
>
> [. . . 'Charon, do not torment yourself.
> It is so willed where will and power are one,
> and ask no more.'
>
> That stilled the shaggy jowls
> of the pilot of the livid marsh,
> about whose eyes burned wheels of flame.
>
> But those souls, naked and desolate,
> lost their color. With chattering teeth
> they heard his brutal words.] (*Inf.* 3.94-102)

Charon's anger is stilled and the damned souls waiting to be judged are frightened by Virgil's words. By contrast, the "small private initiative" of Charon's Nazi counterpart makes the Jews angry—the souls' teeth chatter but the Jews are stirred to laughter and feel relief. Levi's "caronte" has no overarching power structure to which to adhere, whereas Dante-pilgrim's Charon does his work because of the divine justice system

imposed on him (as on all the demons) by God. To each inmate of Auschwitz there appears to be no structure, only torture and chaos. Levi notes that "non è un comando, non è regolamento questo." The chaos prevents Levi from comprehending the location in which he finds himself, even though he recognizes a similarity between his forced entry into the Lager and the somewhat disorderly conveyance of the newly damned towards their infernal abodes.

Levi grasps at the allusion to the initiation in *Inferno* 3 as if to demand answers for why the Jews are being rounded up and condemned to Auschwitz. Having survived the initiation, Levi arrives in a barrack and asks a question about his new abode:

> Ho aperto la finestra, ho staccato il ghiacciolo, ma subito si è fatto avanti uno grande e grosso che si aggirava là fuori, e me lo ha strappato brutalmente. – Warum? – gli ho chiesto nel mio povero tedesco. – Hier ist kein Warum, – (qui non c'è perché), mi ha risposto, ricacciandomi dentro con uno spintone. (*Se Questo* 25)
>
> [I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. '*Warum?*' I asked him in my poor German. '*Hier ist kein warum*' (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.] (Woolf 29)

Though his question is deceptively simple, Levi is searching for complex answers to the riddle of his situation. The German guard's response provides more suffering and no clarity. Levi, still searching to comprehend his situation, recalls another scene from Dante: "Qui non ha loco il Santo Volto! / qui si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio!" [This is no place for the Holy Visage! / Here you swim a different stroke than in the Serchio!] (*Inf.* 21.48-9; quoted in *Se Questo* 25). A devil screams at a soul who attempts to escape re-submersion in the mire of Malebolge. No sooner does this demonic moment from the Eighth Circle cross Levi's mind than he casts his thoughts back to the First: "ora dopo ora, questa prima lunghissima giornata di antinferno volge al termine" (*Se Questo* 25)

[hour after hour, this first long day of limbo draws to its end] (Woolf 29). Thus does his allusive memory move freely across Dante's underworld, drawing Upper and Lower Hell together in an ominous simultaneity. In contrast to the Inferno, with its concentric design rigorously explicable at every turn by the logic of scholastic rationalism, the place where "ist kein Warum" defies rational explanation. In a "why-less" space the explanatory structure of the *Commedia* collapses.

Levi's analysis of logical comprehension continues during his documentation of how the Jews respond to the random choices the Nazis make for them throughout their day. Including himself in this analysis of the structure of Auschwitz, Levi suggests that

> Se fossimo ragionevoli, dovremmo rassegnarci a questa evidenza, che il nostro destino è perfettamente inconoscibile, che ogni congettura è arbitraria ed esattamente priva di fondamento reale. Ma ragionevoli gli uomini sono assai raramente, quando è in gioco il loro proprio destino . . . Le due classi, dei pessimisti e degli ottimisti, non sono peraltro cosí ben distinte: non già perché gli agnostici siano molti, ma perché i piú, senza memoria né coerenza, oscillano fra le due posizioni-limite, a seconda dell'interlocutore e del momento. (*Se Questo* 31)
>
> [If we were logical, we would resign ourselves to the evidence that our fate is beyond knowledge, that every conjecture is arbitrary and demonstrably devoid of foundation. But men are rarely logical when their own fate is at stake . . . The two classes of pessimists and optimists are not so clearly defined, however, not because there are many agnostics, but because the majority, without memory or coherence, drift between the two extremes, according to the moment and the mood of the person they happen to meet.] (Woolf 36)

Levi sees a correspondence between the Noble Pagans in Limbo and the Jews who "oscillano fra le due posizioni-limite," where there are neither sinners nor saints, only souls who were born before Christ's birth or died in infancy without baptism. He also seems to believe, however, that because there are no rules, he cannot control his fate, something he must contend with as he searches for a way to understand the camp. Since Levi is concerned with his own fate, his own suggestion is that he cannot be logical. Here

is perhaps a reason why he plays fast and loose with the strict chronology of events in Dante's underworld journey. Writing retrospectively from a position outside the *Lager*, Levi recognizes his inability to separate himself from the disorder of the "dentro" where "noi" still exist in a state of perpetual suspense.

While initially accepting that he must not be logical, he is unable to maintain that acceptance for long and instead seeks to acknowledge the simple lack of a system. In the latrines, Levi comes across a prisoner, Steinlauf, who explains to him that he must wash, even though any attempt at cleanliness in the *Lager* is futile. While Levi appreciates Steinlauf's attempt to regain an orderly decent life, he cannot adopt the same strategy for himself, and instead asks "sarà proprio necessario elaborare un sistema e praticarlo? O non sarà piú salutare prendere coscienza di non avere sistema?" (*Se Questo* 36) [Is it really necessary to elaborate a system and put it into practice? Or would it not be better to acknowledge one's lack of a system?] (Woolf 41). Levi seeks at least to identify the problem (even if a solution to it is impossible to find) simply in order to maintain his rational grasp on reality. While Steinlauf creates his own system, it is merely personal, idiosyncratic. Levi, who constantly refers to himself in the first person *plural*, is looking for a more universal system of rationally coherent causes and effects.

Lynn M. Gunzberg examines Levi's singularly resolute reliance on a logic not apparent in the camps. Levi must mediate between his personal experience (and others' personal experiences) and an ability to understand all that occurred in the camps. As Gunzberg notes, "the geometry of the *Inferno* and Dante's technique of casting into relief some sinners by endowing them with physical and verbal portraits afforded Levi a structural framework with which to describe the *Lager* and fix a small number of inmates as the universal types—positive and negative—he wished to immortalize" (27). Levi's

use of Steinlauf then becomes an examination of the type of inmate who deals with the lack of logic by creating his own structure, even though that structure does not help Levi himself deal with the lack of rationality in the camps. Gunzberg also commends his use of Dante to interpret the Holocaust by comparing it with his application of the scientific method to

> delve into the forces of nature and human compulsions in order to discover the laws which govern them, laws which remain hidden to the untrained eye . . . Levi shared a bond with Dante for whom theology was the key to unlock[ing] the mysteries of the universe, to discover order in the world and thereby free himself from the confusion and fear residing in the "dark wood." (26)

While Levi, at the beginning of his testimony, casts an "untrained eye" over the rules of Auschwitz, he still seeks to apply laws to the camp, to "unlock the mysteries of the universe," and to "free himself from the confusion and fear" of the *Lager*. His allusions to Dante help the reader to understand the mechanisms of the camp and the impact of its irrationality on himself and his fellow inmates.

When Levi becomes more experienced in the camp and is no longer the "untrained eye," he is able to detect the operation of an "unjust law" within its routine disorderliness. Striving to adopt a universal perspective, he notes that

> Nella storia e nella vita pare talvolta di discernere una legge feroce, che suona <<a chi ha, sarà dato; a chi non ha, a quello sarà tolto>>. Nel Lager, dove l'uomo è solo e la lotta per la vita si riduce al suo meccanismo primordiale, la legge iniqua è apertamente in vigore, è riconosciuta da tutti. (*Se Questo* 80)
>
> [In history and in life one sometimes seems to glimpse a ferocious law which states: 'to he that has, will be given; from he that has not, will be taken away'. In the Lager, where man is alone and where the struggle for life is reduced to its primordial mechanism, this unjust law is openly in force, is recognized by all.] (Woolf 88)

Levi mentions not only "life" but also "history," suggesting that while the mechanism of the camp aimed to deprive the Jews of both, he can still see them. While Levi must at

first rely on "Hier ist kein Warum" as an absurd explanation for his condition, as a more experienced inmate he is able to apply reason to the irrational and develop a provisional understanding of "la legge iniqua." To reconcile the mechanisms of the *Lager* with humanity, he struggles to maintain a rationality that applies to all the "noi" who are "dentro."

Levi's mediations on human nature *in extremis* are not limited to the logic of the camp. While he struggles to float above a wretched underclass satirically labelled "mussulmano" [musselman], whose ranks include "i deboli, gli inetti, i votati alla selezione" (*Se Questo* 80) [the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection] (Woolf 88), he does not ignore how the *Lager* creates these inferiors. Though the label appears late in the testimony, he has seen representatives of this type before, and has discussed them as men destroyed in the camp. A "mussulmano"

> sarà un uomo vuoto, ridotto a sofferenza e bisogno, dimentico di dignità e discernimento, poiché accade facilmente, a chi ha perso tutto, di perdere se stesso; tale quindi, che si potrà a cuor leggero decidere della sua vita o morte al di fuori di ogni senso di affinità umana; nel caso piú fortunato, in base ad un puro giudizio di utilità. (*Se Questo* 23)
>
> [will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility.] (Woolf 27)

Levi here identifies with someone other than this "uomo vuoto," which suggests that he has not lost himself. Previously Levi noted that if such figures were logical men they would realize that they had no choice over their own life and death, but here he contradicts that statement when he notes that this hollow man's life or death can be lightly decided "al di fuori di ogni senso di affinità umana." In either case there seems to be no choice given to the inmate, but Levi sees himself as having a choice. He can either

resign himself to becoming a hollow man or resist it by retaining his sense of human dignity.

Gunzberg defines how Levi must view Dante's *Inferno*. She describes his understanding of the Inferno as "a place in which the naked shadow of a man, reduced from subject to object, is completely at the mercy of forces greater than himself, powers which reside in everyone and everything other than he—even other prisoners. To cling to past realities was defeating and yet to give them up was to give in" (13). Instead of clinging to a past reality, Levi chooses instead to cling to a fictional account from his past life as an intellectual. In this way he is able not to "give in" but also not to be defeated by his own memories. His allusions to Dante seem to highlight not just the similarities but also the differences between them as authors, differences overlooked by Gunzberg. As a vast prison, the Inferno reveals the operations of a Divine Power greater than the collective will of Fallen Humanity; but still, as the pilgrim discovers, the souls condemned to its depths are not entirely stripped of power. Levi's Hell, by contrast, contains only the disempowered. In order to make the reader understand the destruction of humanity, Levi intensifies an image of Fallen Man already horrific in its original Dantean context. While Gunzberg notes that to return to a past reality "was defeating," this "defeat" allows Levi to confront the Nazis' attack on humanity and to withstand the attack on the dignity of his own personhood.

Like the hierarchical design of the Inferno, the power-structure of the *Lager* hides its disorder beneath the illusion of a tyrannical distribution of labour. As Gunzberg points out:

> . . . if one could ascend *this* pyramid one would pass through thugs in positions of middling responsibility, to the jackbooted brutality of the SS to reach the rarefied circles of madness in the high command. Levi calls this the

> geometrical insanity of the *Lager*, that is the creation of an elaborate and efficient system by which the elements of human life—even intangibles such as the limit of physical and psychological endurance—are measured by their contribution to the goal of destruction. (15)

Levi is unable to ascend this pyramid. Recognizing that the goal of destruction requires human sacrifice, he is nevertheless unable to be that person who is willing to sacrifice others for his own personal gain.

Still meditating on the will to destroy humanity at the heart of the *Lager*, Levi reports on the return of the inmates to the camp at night after a day's work:

> Quando questa musica suona, noi sappiamo che i compagni, fuori nella nebbia, partono in marcia come automi; le loro anime sono morte e la musica li sospinge, come il vento le foglie secche, e si sostituische alla loro volontà. Non c'è piú volontà: ogni pulsazione diventa un passo, una contrazione riflessa dei muscoli sfatti. I tedeschi sono riusciti a questo. Sono diecimila, e sono una sola grigia macchina; sono esattamente determinati; non pensano e non vogliono, camminano. (*Se Questo* 45)
>
> [When this music plays we know that our comrades, out in the fog, are marching like automatons; their souls are dead and the music drives them, like the wind drives dead leaves, and takes the place of their wills. There is no longer any will: every beat of the drum becomes a step, a reflected contraction of exhausted muscles. The Germans have succeeded in this. They are ten thousand and they are a single grey machine; they are exactly determined; they do not think and they do not desire, they walk.] (Woolf 51)

The will of these "automi" has been destroyed; they "non pensano e non vogliono, camminano." Their humanity has been stripped to the core and they only follow the insanity of the *Lager*. The Nazis have succeeded in making the "diecimila" a "sola grigia macchina." While Levi is clearly here blaming the Nazis for the reduction of humanity to a machine, the consequent destruction of humanity makes him turn again to Dante. This passage includes an allusion to *Inferno* 13 where Dante meets the suicides and is asked by one of them to pick up the leaves of his bush which have been scattered by a passing soul (*Inf.* 13.139-51). Levi uses this echo to suggest a typological parallel between the

vegetative state of the automatons in the camps and the immobility of the human "vegetation" in the Wood of the Suicides. The unnamed soul's leaves are tossed to the ground just as Levi describes the "automi" as having souls blown "come il vento le foglie secche." Levi implicitly distinguishes himself from such souls at a tropological as well as psychological level, just as Dante did in confronting the metamorphic consequences of the sinful despair of the suicides. He does not want to be like the "diecimila" who return to the *Lager* every evening, the "diecimila" who have already given up.

Although Levi singles himself out as different from the mass of inmates in the *Lager*, he readily acknowledges the importance of having wise guides to help him survive. Initially guides are dismissed as useless. When Levi and the others from his transport are waiting for instructions, a young French prisoner comes in to tell them what to do next. They ask many questions of this boy, but as Levi notes,

> non parla volentieri: nessuno qui parla volentieri. Siamo nuovi, non abbiamo niente e non sappiamo niente; a che scopo perdere tempo con noi? (*Se Questo* 25)
>
> [he does not speak willingly; no one here speaks willingly. We are new, we have nothing and we know nothing; why waste time on us?] (Woolf 29)

A guide is put into the room with them, but he does not want to waste time with the new inmates. The inmates finally get a few answers, but when they ask him a pointed question about this destination, he responds with a sneer: "Vous n'êtes pas à la maison" (*Se Questo* 25).[9] There is only contempt for Levi's question, no good will directed at him at all. The Dantean counterpart of this figure is Pier delle Vigne. Dante is instructed by Virgil to snap a branch from a thorn tree in order that the soul trapped inside it might give

[9] ["You are not at home."] The translation of these words is not provided in *Survival in Auschwitz: A Nazi Assault on Humanity*. Levi recreates the unwillingness to talk by leaving the translation out of his text, just as Woolf also leaves out the translation.

voice to his agony. At first the soul angrily questions Dante's motives for breaking the branch (*Inf.* 13.28-36). Even after a channel is opened up for his voice, Pier has difficulty forming words and transmitting them to his listener (*Inf.* 13.40-4). Virgil informs Pier that he must speak, forcing him to tell Dante of his decision to commit suicide. The young boy sent in to speak to the Jews as a guide does not speak willingly or kindly, just as Pier delle Vigne must be forced by Virgil to speak to Dante. No one in the *Lager* speaks willingly, and when they do speak the words are not meant to guide the Jews.

Prompted by Virgil, Pier explains that Dante will not believe his explanation. Pier must therefore speak for himself, and if he does speak, Dante will be able to increase his fame in the world (*Inf.* 13.46-54). By alluding to this incident, Levi not only highlights the harsh nature of the camp but also confronts the problem of disbelief. He explains that because they are new and have nothing and know nothing they are not worth anything to the French boy. These initiates cannot guarantee that they will be able to believe anything the French boy might tell them. The snarled remark "Vous n'êtes pas à la maison" reminds them that they will find nothing familiar in the *Lager*, only a strangeness, a newness, a bareness. The talking thorn trees are similarly out of the ordinary, so unfamiliar in fact that Virgil anticipates Dante's incredulity in addressing the suicides. While Virgil promises fame when Dante returns to the world, such a reward is inconsequential from the viewpoint of the Christian poet. Dante-poet establishes fame for Pier but this does not change the suicide's afterlife. Levi describes his questions as "con un'ingenuità" (*Se Questo* 25) [with an ingenuity] (Woolf 29) he later thinks is incredible. The echo bleakly suggests that despite the promise of fame, nothing in the situation can be changed, for either Pier or Levi. They are both condemned to their respective prisons.

Recalling the aphasic despair of the suicides, Levi notes that no one in the *Lager* speaks willingly. While Pier physically manifests this condition in his imprisoning bark, the outward sign of his suicidal introversion, Levi resists it with all his intellectual force by identifying the will to speak with the will to live in the camp. The young boy can gain nothing from Levi and so refuses to answer his questions. Pier assumes the role of spokesman in the Wood of the Suicides but does so unwillingly and only because he is promised fame. Levi, by contrast, is able to define himself as human through the need to understand and the will to return and tell of his experiences just as Dante returns to tell of Pier's suicide. This unwillingness, however, still leaves Levi without a guide.

His true guide to survival, the provider of mental stability as well as physical nourishment, is a fellow inmate named Lorenzo. He proves to be the very opposite of a hollow man:

> . . . la sua umanità era pura e incontaminata, egli era al di fuori di questo mondo di negazione. Grazie a Lorenzo mi è accaduto di non dimenticare di essere io stesso un uomo. (*Se Questo* 109)
>
> [. . . his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.] (Woolf 122)

In order to function as Levi's Virgil, Lorenzo must be able to maintain his "umanità" under the most appalling pressures of negation and dehumanization. Where the Frenchman had no willingness to maintain human connections by answering Levi, Lorenzo takes the time to do so and reminds Levi of what humanity is.

Levi's philosophical concern with these human connections is highlighted by the conditional clause he chose as the title for his memoir: *Se Questo È un Uomo*. When the literal translation "If This is a Man" was not considered sellable in the North American market, Levi made sure that his concern with humanity was emphasized in the

periphrastic alternative title *Survival in Auschwitz: A Nazi Assault on Humanity* (Judt 46). Here the reader returns to Steinlauf's personal system of survival. While Levi notes that "dopo mezz'ora ai sacchi di carbone ogni differenza . . . sarà scomparsa" (*Se Questo* 35) [after half an hour with the coal sacks every difference . . . will have disappeared] (Woolf 40) Steinlauf continues to wash. In recalling Steinlauf's actions Levi first describes the manner of the ex-soldier's speech as a sign of his humanity and then sums up the unforgettable lesson behind it that could not be lost in translation:

> Ho scordato ormai, e me ne duole, le sue parole diritte e chiare, le parole del già sergente Steinlauf dell'esercito austro-ungarico, croce di ferro della guerra '14-18. Me ne duole, perché dovrò tradurre il suo italiano incerto e il suo discorso piano di buon soldato nel mio linguaggio di uomo incredulo. Ma questo ne era il senso, non dimenticato allora né poi: che appunto perché il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie, noi bestie non dobbiamo diventare. (*Se Questo* 35)
>
> [It grieves me now that I have forgotten his plain, outspoken words, the words of ex-sergeant Steinlauf of the Austro-Hungarian army, Iron Cross of the '14-'18 war. It grieves me because it means that I have to translate his uncertain Italian and his quiet manner of speaking of a good soldier into my language of an incredulous man. But this was the sense, not forgotten either then or later: that precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts.] (Woolf 41)

Though memory fails him when it comes to the exact wording of Steinlauf's lesson, he cannot forget the sergeant's exemplary resistance to dehumanization. By remembering Steinlauf's humanity, Levi is able to differentiate his approach in the camps from Steinlauf's, but in so doing remembers himself as a person. His fervent recollection of the tropological impact of the sergeant's lesson is directly followed by a discussion of how the *Lager* was designed to make men beasts. Steinlauf washes to maintain his humanity, to resist the design of the *Lager*, and this is what Levi remembers, even if he does not remember the words of the man. As Gillian Banner points out memory is tied into the ability to remain human. She notes that "there is also the recognition that, for

survival to be possible, memories of life 'before' and 'outside' Auschwitz were vital, recollection was life-giving" (88). After the camp Levi is unable to remember the Steinlauf of 'before' and 'outside' Auschwitz, the "già sergente Steinlauf dell'esercito austro-ungarico," but he does remember what he has forgotten about him and so perhaps this also sustains the ideal of humanity exemplified by the sergeant.

In his fundamentally humanistic classification of the inmates, Levi differentiates between beasts and human beings, noting that the prevailing destiny in the camps was to become a beast. As he describes it:

> Bisogna risalire la corrente; dare battaglia ogni giorno e ogni ora alla fatica, alla fame, al freddo, e alla inerzia che ne deriva; resistere ai nemici e non aver pietà per i rivali; aguzzare l'ingegno, indurare la pazienza, tendere la volontà. O anche, strozzare ogni dignità e spegnere ogni lume di coscienza, scendere in campo da bruti contro gli altri bruti, lasciarsi guidare dalle insospettate forze sotterranee che sorreggono le stirpi e gli individui nei tempi crudeli. (*Se Questo* 83)
>
> [One has to fight against the current; to battle every day and every hour against exhaustion, hunger, cold and the resulting inertia; to resist enemies and have no pity for rivals; to sharpen one's wits, build up one's patience, strengthen one's will-power. Or else, to throttle all dignity and kill all conscience, to climb down into the arena as a beast against other beasts, to let oneself be guided by those unsuspected subterranean forces which sustain families and individuals in cruel times.] (Woolf 92)

A battle line is drawn here between mental acuity and bestial activity. Ironically, both of these push against the current. How is Levi able to reconcile this self-survival with fighting? As an inmate one must either fight with every ounce of one's humanity or be reduced to fighting like a beast. Either way the human soul is drained. The survivor must have a will of steel or no will at all.

In Lower Hell Dante meets many condemned souls who likewise seem to have climbed down "in campo da bruti contro gli altri bruti." Malebolge is especially teeming with brutish shades, from the hybrid mouth of Geryon to the frog-like Barrators in the

pitch to the reptilian Thieves. In the Tenth Bolgia the disfigured Counterfeiters have lost their human uprightness because their sinful lives devalued the image of God in Man:

> Qual sovra 'l ventre e qual sovra le spalle
> l'un de l'altro giacea, e qual carpone
> si trasmutava per lo tristo calle.
>
> [Some lay upon the bellies or the backs
> of others, still others dragged themselves
> on hands and knees along that gloomy path.] (*Inf.* 29.67-9)

Here is the Dantean version of the fight against exhaustion, the going against the current where "non aver pietà per i rivali." By strategically alluding to the bestial metamorphoses in *Inferno*, Levi implicitly removes himself from the ranks of those who lower themselves to fight like beasts. He identifies himself as one who uses his mental acuity to fight against the current of the camp. While Dante succeeds in escaping from the infernal prison, Levi is not sure he will.

Banner continues her psychological analysis of Levi's memoir by looking at the exhaustion that occurs when trying to maintain one's humanity through memory. The choice to remember is as painful as the choice to remain human: "survival, psychological as well as physical, depends on a ready perception of the necessity of recognizing when to remember, when to forget. Memory is represented as acutely painful; to remember homes whilst in the process of being taken from them bestows little benefit" (95). The memory of what one once was is important for survival, but to remember everything that is attached to oneself may be dangerous. This is also why Levi explains to the reader that the recurring dream about his sister must not be relived. The pain accompanying it is

> dolore allo stato puro, non temperato dal senso della realtà e dalla intrusione di circostanze estranee, simile a quelli per cui i bambini piangono; ed è meglio per me risalire ancora una volta in superficie, ma questa volta apro deliberatamente gli occhi, per avere di fronte a me stesso una garanzia di essere effettivamente sveglio. (*Se Questo* 53-4)

> [pain in its pure state, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain like that which makes children cry; and it is better for me to swim once again up to the surface, but this time I deliberately open my eyes to have a guarantee in front of me of being effectively awake.] (Woolf 60)

In such a dream, memories are brought forward unconsciously and the nostalgia behind them plunges the dreamer into melancholia, a pain so deep that he feels that he is drowning. While memory is important in protecting his human identity and strengthening his will to survive the camps, Levi clearly recognizes the need for selective memory.

Even though Levi needs selective memory in the *Lager*, facing survival after the camps made selective memory unacceptable. Levi struggles with his memory, with the point-by-point recording of his experiences, as he struggles to document the full experience of the *Lager*. He interrupts his narrative to say that "questo vero oggi in cui io sto seduto a un tavolo e scrivo, io stesso non sono convinto che queste cose sono realmente accadute" (*Se Questo* 93) [at this very moment as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened] (Woolf 103). Even Levi himself cannot believe that what happened in the camps is real even as he recalls the events he experienced. Dante also faces this fear although he admits it at the beginning of his narrative, noting that it is hard to tell what he saw and the attempt at doing so renews his fear of being at the beginning of his journey (*Inf.* 1.4-6). Levi does not mention the fear of writing his testimony until much later in the text and by that point he is so far into the narrative that the reader believes his story and hopefully has confidence in his writing. Dante begins his journey with that fear. The phobic intensity of their recollections indicates how deeply both authors are concerned with the reception of their memories,

hoping that they will be able to maintain credibility to the very end of their incredible stories.

The problem of credibility is also connected to a problem of language. The confusion of language at the camps is illustrated in Levi's egregiously allegorical account of how the inmates built the Carbide Tower. He lists the different names for bricks and discusses how the bricks were cemented by hate. He then explains that the tower was built with

> l'odio e la discordia, come la Torre di Babele, e cosí noi la chiamiamo: Babelturm, Bobelturm; e odiamo in essa il sogno demente di grandezza dei nostri padroni, il loro disprezzo di Dio e degli uomini, di noi uomini. (*Se Questo* 65)
>
> [hate and discord, like the Tower of Babel, and it is this that we will call it: – Babelturm, Bobelturm; and in it we hate the insane dream of grandeur of our masters, their contempt for God and men, for us men.] (Woolf 73)

The only thing Levi can make sense of is the hatred and discord of the men building the tower, not the languages or the rationality of their "padroni." Levi also recognizes a hatred of God and a delusion of grandeur in these masters. Upon arrival at the gates to the City of Dis, Dante and Virgil are confronted with a crowd of angels who are angry at seeing a living man in their midst. These are the rebellious angels who fought with Satan against God. They angrily shout at Dante and Virgil that he should not be on the journey and should not pass through the Gate (*Inf.* 8.82-5). Dante does not hate these angels and instead worries that they will prevent him from his path. Levi however uses the echo to show the hatred that he and his fellow men also feel for those who hate God and hate men. While Dante feels fear and bewilderment—rather than hatred—at the sight of the Rebel Angels who were proud enough to believe they could defeat God, Levi frames his allegory of Babel with strong expressions of moral outrage at his "padroni."

Before meeting Nimrod, the king who constructed the Tower of Babel, Dante asks Virgil: "Maestro, dì, che terra è questa?" [Master, tell me, what city is this?] (*Inf.* 31.21). Dante has seen what he believes to be towers in the distance and wants to know what city could be at the bottom of Hell. Virgil explains that what Dante believes to be towers are actually giants. When they reach the giant Nimrod they cannot communicate with him because he speaks a tongue only he can understand: an ego-imprisoning idiolect. Virgil tells Dante that they should not waste their speech on him because he cannot understand them and they cannot understand him (*Inf.* 31.76-81). Nimrod cannot be a man because he cannot communicate with other men. Levi recollects the Dantean identification of human nature with the power of speech in his meditation on the limits of language to express the horror of dehumanization at the camps:

> Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo. In un attimo, con intuizione quasi profetica, la realtà ci si è rivelata: siamo arrivati al fondo. Piú giú di cosí non si può andare: condizione umana piú misera non c'è, e non è pensabile. Nulla piú è nostro: ci hanno tolto gli abiti, le scarpe, anche i capelli; se parleremo, non ci ascolteranno, e se ci ascoltassero, non ci capirebbero. Ci toglieranno anche il nome: e se vorremo conservarlo, dovremo trovare in noi la forza di farlo, di fare sí che dietro al nome, qualcosa ancora di noi, di noi quali eravamo, rimanga. (*Se Questo* 23)
>
> [Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.] (Woolf 26)

While the language may not be there, while there may not be words to explain what has happened to him, Levi must struggle to hold onto his humanity by struggling to express

the offence of "demolizione." Levi's attempt to communicate is successful where Nimrod's is not. In writing his testimony, he is also able to give a name to those who may have lost theirs, just as Dante gives names to those who may have been forgotten and who cannot communicate for themselves.

In Antenora, the second zone of the Ninth Circle, Dante literally bumps into Bocca degli Abati. When Bocca will not reveal who he is, Dante threatens to rip hair from his scalp. When Bocca still will not reveal who he is, Dante does not back off in fear but instead follows through with his threat. Levi records that the inmates lose their humanity by losing their clothes, their shoes, even their hair, but when Bocca loses his hair he does not fight to keep his identity. Instead, he refuses to reveal it. Levi says that he has reached the bottom; he has reached the lowest point in the camp because he has lost everything that familiarly confirms who he is. He does not have the words even to describe this loss, but maintains that he must somehow preserve whatever is left of his personhood. Language is insufficient to explain "la demolizione di un uomo," but by connecting his experience with the debasement of Nimrod and Bocca, Levi is able to get around the double problem of linguistic and psychological breakdown to convey a typological sense of his worst experiences in the *Lager*.

Tony Judt reviews Levi's concern with the "demolition of a man" by drawing attention to the description of a child named Hurbinek in Levi's *The Reawakening*. The child was born in the camps, is unable to move from his atrophied limbs, and has no language to use. Levi describes how, despite all this, Hurbinek seems very much alive:

> . . . his eyes, lost in his triangular and wasted face, flashed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness. The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency: it was a stare both savage and human, even mature, a judgement, which none of us could

> support, so heavy was it with force and anguish. . . . Hurbinek, who was three years old and perhaps had been born in Auschwitz and had never seen a tree; Hurbinek, who had fought like a man, to the last breath, to gain his entry into the world of men, from which a bestial power had excluded him; Hurbinek, the nameless, whose tiny forearm—even his—bore the tattoo of Auschwitz; Hurbinek died in the first days of March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine. (Judt 59-60)

Just as Nimrod is restricted and unable to speak, so too is Hurbinek, but in his humility the child miraculously retains his humanity while the giant is bestialized by the ferocity of his pride. Unlike Nimrod, Hurbinek is called "free." Judt notes that "the importance of language—that we can communicate and we must communicate, that language is vital to humanity and the deprivation of language the first step to the destruction of a man—was enforced within the camp" (57). While Hurbinek was deprived of language, Levi invests the child's hapless vocalizations with defiant meaning. Levi gives Hurbinek the words he cannot speak explaining that he was "full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness." Hurbinek wills communication even without language whereas Nimrod only fulfils his role in *Inferno* as a type of Pride. The denial to conform to the mechanism desired by the Nazis, the assertion of free will demonstrated by Hurbinek, counters the demolition of a man through the destruction of language.

As Levi continues his testimony, his sense of the inadequacy of language does not leave his mind or his narrative. Even as his testimony approaches the moment of his escape from the *Lager*, he still reflects on this problem of the meaning of words and the empty understanding of those who are not survivors. In his opinion,

> Come questa nostra fame non è la sensazione di chi ha saltato un pasto, cosí il nostro modo di aver freddo esigerebbe un nome particolare. Noi diciamo <<fame>>, diciamo <<stanchezza>>, <<paura>>, e <<dolore>>, diciamo <<inverno>>, e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case. Se i Lager fossero durati piú a lungo, un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato; e di questo si

> sente il bisogno per spiegare cosa è faticare l'intera giornata nel vento, sotto zero, con solo indosso camicia, mutande, giacca e brache di tela, e in corpo debolezza e fame e consapevolezza della fine che viene. (*Se Questo* 110)
>
> [Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer.] (Woolf 123)

While Levi can say that he knows these new definitions of words, most of the readers of his testimony cannot. They are the "uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case" and are not the inmates of the *Lager*. Levi ends his reflection by stating that the knowledge they all have is that "della fine che viene." Levi uses all his literary resources and rhetorical powers to help the reader understand what his experience in the *Lager* was, and when language and his memory fail, he turns to Dantean echoes in order to explicate the pain and suffering and horror.

His testimony famously includes an extended reference to Dante's *Inferno* that is not an echo. The chapter entitled "Il Canto di Ulisse" [The Canto of Ulysses] deals with the recitation of lines from *Inferno* 26 that Levi struggles to remember while on a walk at lunch with Jean the Frenchman to get their soup. The recitation is neither complete nor completely accurate. Levi is only able to remember nineteen lines from *Inferno* 26 and he does not start at the beginning of the canto, remembering only the beginning of Ulysses's speech. Though physically and mentally exhausted in the *Lager*, he is aided by this fragment of the *Commedia* to answer the questions that he has raised in the previously mentioned quotations but has been unable to answer.

After reciting the two-tercet leading to Ulysses's speech which includes its first word "Quando" [When] (*Inf.* 26.85-90), Levi skips over the navigational details of the hero's voyage as well as his poignant declaration that he and his shipmates "eravam vecchi e tardi" [had grown old and slow] (*Inf.* 26.106). Neither of these conditions are worth thinking about in the *Lager*, nor is it a good idea to remember the other shipmates from Levi's previous life. At the beginning of Levi's time in the *Lager*, the Italians agree to meet weekly, but after a few weeks this ritual stops (*Se Questo* 32). Banner notes that "the losses and grave injury to which the Italians had been exposed are intensified by the poignancy and swiftness of their recognition that memory is a problem, that to be reminded of the people they once were might only damage them further" (89). Perhaps this is also why Levi is unable to remember the mention of Ulysses's discussion of his own family waiting at home for him. Levi cannot imagine his family; he does not have the mental or physical resources to maintain this form of memory and so skips over it. Levi has found a way to mediate between remembering the man he was before his capture and the man he is trying to remain in the *Lager*. By being able to access his intellectual past while ignoring his family past, Levi is able to maintain the identity he had before the *Lager* without damaging himself further.

The tiny inaccuracies in Levi's recitation of what he recalls from this famous set-piece, a speech routinely memorized by Italian schoolchildren to this day, serve to highlight his deep anxiety about the untrustworthiness of memory. Where Dante has Ulysses say "quanto veduta non avëa alcuna" [higher than any I had ever seen] (*Inf.* 26.135) in his description of the mysterious mountain glimpsed from his ship, Levi remembers the line as "che mai veduta non ne avevo alcuna" [I had never seen the like on any day] (Woolf 114). This misremembering might also be construed as a creative

misreading, for Levi is striving to express the utter incomparability of what he saw in the *Lager*. However, just as Ulysses and his men die, seeing what they had "never" seen before, Dante is able to give them a voice—he is able to voice the inexpressible. Even if Levi says "never" because what he sees in the *Lager* is so incomprehensible, he still writes it down and he still tells the story of what he had never seen before. While translating the *Inferno* to Jean, he insists that Jean understand every word of the translation (*Se Questo* 101). The successful translation of the *Inferno* and Jean's helpful suggestions for clarification indicate that Levi is at least attempting to make the incomprehensible accessible to human understanding. The change of words in line 135 demonstrates that Levi is facing his fear of being unable to be heard.

Another event that Levi does not recite is the discussion held between Virgil and Dante about who will speak to Ulysses. Dante is unable to communicate with Ulysses and so it is Virgil who translates (implicitly) for Ulysses so that Dante can hear the story. Levi appears to align himself with Virgil while he is translating Ulysses's speech so that Jean can hear the story. In his previous allusions to Dante he identifies himself with the wayward pilgrim in need of guidance rather than with the "maestro" who knows the way. He also ignores a recitation of Dante-poet's description of the False Counsellors in *Inferno* 26. When Levi recites the lines, he is twice removed from the wisdom of a false counsellor. His avoidance of this role highlights his own quest to find a reliable guide for the duration of his stay in the *Lager*. Just as Dante constructs an allegorical route towards wisdom out of all the words of all the souls he meets in the afterlife, so Levi must guide himself and his readers out of the dehumanizing mentality of the camps through the words of everyone he comes across, no matter how faltering, inadequate, or interrupted the tale of his mad journey may seem in the telling or the translation. Levi also isolates

himself in his incorrect recitation of Ulysses's account of glimpsing Mount Purgatory. Dante's text reads "quando n'apparve una montagna" [when we could see a mountain] (*Inf.* 26.133), while Levi's version switches from the first-person plural to the first-person singular: "Quando mi apparve una montagna" (*Se Questo* 102) [When a mountain appeared to me] (my translation). In this moment, the recitation places Levi in the role of guide, but as an inmate Levi recognizes himself only as one of many in need of a guide. Levi is able to reconcile both roles by choosing each role when necessity presents itself.

The "Canto di Ulisse" also demonstrates Levi's concern with the predictable failure of language to communicate the full horror of his experiences. As previously mentioned, he refrains from mentioning that it is Virgil who has to communicate with Ulysses and not Dante, especially since the previous representative of linguistic breakdown is Nimrod, whom Levi and Dante both align with inhumanity. When Levi tries to recall the line "gittò voce di fuori e disse: 'Quando . . .'" [it brought forth a voice and said: 'When...'] (*Inf.* 26.90), he alters it to "Mise fuori la voce, e disse: Quando . . ." (*Se Questo* 101) [Threw out a voice and answered: "When . . ."] (Woolf 112). Levi puts the word "fuori" [outside] before the word "voce" [voice] whereas Dante chooses to write "voice" first and "outside" second. Levi's concern is so pressing that before he can speak of a voice he must first speak of being outside that voice. At the same time, when Dante writes "infin che 'l mar fu sovra noi *richiuso*" [until the sea closed over us] (*Inf.* 26.142, italics added) Levi writes "infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi *rinchiuso*" (*Se Questo* 103, italics added) [And over our heads the hollow seas closed up] (Woolf 115). Dante's choice of "richiuso" connotes the locking of some*thing* in again but Levi's choice of "rinchiuso" connotes the locking of some*one* in again. Whereas Dante sees the soul as something to be locked in again, Levi sees Ulysses as being trapped in a cell. Perhaps, for Levi, there

is no way to reconcile being both inside as a survivor and outside as a survivor. He is only able to tell his narrative because he survived the *Lager*, which also means that he did not experience all the horrors of the camp (such as the gas chambers). His voice is also outside of what others want to hear. Levi wants Jean to understand

> Chi è Dante. Che cosa è la Commedia. Quale sensazione curiosa di novità si prova, se si cerca di spiegare in breve che cosa è la Divina Commedia. Come è distribuito l'Inferno, cosa è il contrappasso. Virgilio è la Ragione, Beatrice è la Teologia. (*Se Questo* 101)
>
> [Who is Dante? What is the Comedy? That curious sensation of novelty which one feels if one tries to explain briefly what is the Divine Comedy. How the Inferno is divided up, what are its punishments. Virgil is Reason, Beatrice is Theology.] (Woolf 112)

Levi's attempt to recite *Inferno* 26 does not answer all of these questions. He does not have enough time to conduct a learned discussion with Jean about the relation between Reason and Theology in the *Commedia*. Instead, he does what he can. He recites what he can remember and uses the recitation to lift his spirits and to teach Jean a little Italian. While Levi is unable to answer all the questions raised by the speech of Ulysses or to explain everything that occurred during his time in the *Lager*, he does answer a few questions and this effort, in the "Canto of Ulysses," is enough for Levi to become spiritually uplifted.

At the end of *Se Questo È un Uomo*, Levi reflects on his time in the camps and his amazement at being free. He speaks of the Russians arriving and how, despite being in the *Lager*, they all think of "salvamenti biblici nelle avversità estreme" (*Se Questo* 140) [biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity] (Woolf 158). Levi's time in the camps has finished and until he returns to write his memoir, he does not need to expand upon his engagement with *Inferno*, preferring to adopt a more hopeful outlook, on his life after the Hell of Auschwitz. Against all odds, Levi fights against the Nazis' system of human

destruction and his own individual demolition by combating the despair felt at being left alone in the camps at the end of the war. By preserving in himself the very humanity that the Nazis sought to destroy, he can set out towards a future unmarred by the injustice of the Third Reich. While Levi alludes to the *Inferno* in order to express the feelings he is unable to put into his own words, what may surprise the reader is that his references to the *Inferno* are concerned with Limbo as well as with the voyage of Ulysses. His prevailing concern is with his own life in the Here and Now, not with someone else's afterlife (however vividly imagined) or with the relationship between the punished and the punishers (as one might expect from a Jewish inmate). While his initial focus on Limbo suggests a preoccupation with his perilous status as an intellectual in the camps, his deeper interest in the canto of Ulysses reveals his philosophical quest to deploy memory in the heroic fight to cling on to his humanity. Then in his final meditation on his time in the camp and of his rescue, he turns away from infernal images of condemnation towards the blessed possibility of a perfectly ordinary social life. Just as Dante moves from Hell to Purgatory, Levi also manages to escape the prison into which he entered unwillingly, and with uncertain steps, to push himself back towards the horizon of hope.

CHAPTER TWO

The Memory of Stronger Nails: Andrzej Wajda's *Kanał* and Dante's *Purgatorio*

Critical responses to *Kanał*, Andrzej Wajda's film about the Warsaw Uprising (August – October 1944), were remarkably varied at the time of its release in 1957. Some reviewers pessimistically complained that Wajda had destroyed a heroic moment in Polish history, while others fervently hoped that *Kanał* might send an encouraging message to the Polish public (if not to the world at large) about humanity's spiritual capacity to recover from the War. One critic mused that "maybe *Kanał* will mark the beginning of the truth being told about history, about ourselves, about a whole generation. Perhaps it will prove to be art as warning, art as purgation, a triumph of the heroism of life over the heroism of death?" (Michałek 36). While none of the escapees in the film survives, their collective quest for liberation from the madness and despair of occupied Warsaw is represented as unquestionably noble. Instead of mythologizing the real men and women who attempted to escape through the sewers, the film seeks to allegorize their journey both typologically and tropologically. If the tragic outcome of the escape prevents any clear access to anagogic interpretations of the film, it should come as no surprise: a pre-eminently modern (and Modernist) art form like the cinema is an unlikely vehicle for delivering mystical truths about the afterlife. Eternity lies perversely beyond the scope of moving pictures. Nevertheless, as an allegorical film, *Kanał* raises the moral perspective of its viewers beyond the confusion of historical events and the clash of political wills towards a purgatorial vision of art—most notably the art of the cinema—as an oracular therapeutic means to reveal and redress the traumatizing truth about war as "the heroism of death."

While a narrative trajectory through the mucky sewers beneath Warsaw is apt to suggest an underworld journey such as Dante's descent through the Inferno, Wajda surprisingly looks back at the Warsaw Uprising through the lens of *Purgatorio*. Infernal despair would have been all too easy an emotion for the filmmaker to play up or to play on in his recreation of the escape, and he certainly addresses it as a dangerous possibility for both his characters and his viewers. From the start, however, the moral "impeto" behind his project is humanity's invincible hope of deliverance from evil.

The opening scene in *Kanał* ironically shows the Nazis extinguishing fires in Warsaw as if they were seeking to preserve or rebuild it. Then, when the main characters of the platoon are introduced, the narrator explains that one of the soldiers, Korab, suffers without his daily bath (00:03:59). The next time Korab appears in the film, he is washing himself. Washing is a key image in *Purgatorio*. Before Dante begins his ascent of the Holy Mountain, Virgil commands him to clean off the dirt of the Inferno (*Purg.* 1.95). There is no such command in *Inferno*, only an initiation into the mire of Hell. If any space explicitly corresponds to Hell in *Kanał*, it is Warsaw. When Lieutenant Zadra makes his first appearance in the film, his colonel bluntly informs him that their stronghold is Hell. "Yes, that's always an option," he replies (00:08:34). This somewhat enigmatic response opens up the possibility of a counter-gloss on the scene: perhaps Warsaw might be perceived from another tropological perspective as a purgatorial space of patient endurance and ultimate deliverance.

When the platoon receives the order to retreat through the sewers, Lieutenant Madry, the second in command, gets drunk before departure in order to drown his feelings of despair at the prospect of defeat. When Zadra confronts him, Madry remarks that he will "sober up" on his way downtown (00:38:40). While the drunkenness can be

seen as an infernal act of despair, the recognition that the journey through the sewers will help Madry clear his mind opens up once again the possibility of a purgatorial way of reading their difficult journey. The top of Mount Purgatory is where souls enter Lethe and Eunoe in order to cleanse their minds for the ascent to Paradise. Both Madry and the purged souls share the characteristic of arriving at the end of their journey with a clear mind, ready for the final ascent (whether to Wilcza street or to Paradise). In the streets of Warsaw we see a crowd waiting to be taken into the sewers (00:43:00), much like the souls waiting to be ferried across by Charon (*Inf.* 3.74); later in the film, when Korab and Stokrotka are underground, Korab remarks that the sewers appear as "a dark and fragrant forest" (01:10:32). The Dark Wood at the start of Inferno is here strangely merged with the fragrant forest found at the top of Mount Purgatory as if to imply that Dante's "hope of the heights" (*Inf.* 1.54) might be recovered even in the depths of the Warsaw sewers.

The final actions of Lieutenant Zadra in the film also suggest a hope beyond despair. When Zadra and Kula climb out of the sewers, Zadra discovers that Kula has lied about the men of the platoon following them. Zadra shoots Kula for his lies and then re-enters the sewers to find the platoon (01:34:18). The identification of Kula as a traitor is revealed to Zadra outside the sewers, and therefore the apparent descent back into the sewers renews Zadra's hope of helping his platoon, just as Dante appears to climb down Satan's body only to discover that he is moving up towards Purgatorio. While, as Falkowska notes, this event demonstrates "the themes of Christian sacrifice and of senseless carnage," Zadra's decision to return to the sewers demonstrates his hope that heroic self-sacrifice might lead to deliverance for the escapees just as Christ's Passion and Descent into Hell led to the Redemption. In a war-torn Warsaw, however, Zadra feels it is his duty to administer the punishment to Kula, whereas Christ would not have

killed anyone. In this sense Zadra has not achieved full purgation and must therefore descend into the sewers again. While Zadra's return to the sewers entails a physical descent, the physical descent in *Inferno* turns out to be an ascent towards purgation: Zadra's actions can therefore also appear as purgative, mirroring the moral inversion of Dante's infernal journey.

Halinka's suicide is another seemingly infernal moment in the film for which a purgatorial meaning emerges. Dante makes clear the place of suicides in the Seventh Circle, but the final image of Halinka, where she is looking up and off into the distance as if she is contemplating God, suggests an ascent towards salvation. The gun shot is fired in darkness, and when Madry shines his light on her the viewer sees Halinka looking upwards and at peace, not distraught. As Falkowska notes, in *Kanał*

> Love—a source of strength and the wellspring of life—is also betrayed in the relationship between Halinka and Madry, when the latter suddenly announces to his young lover that he has a wife and children. Crushed and mortified, Halinka shoots herself. The other soldiers feel similarly disenchanted by his duplicity, and they are rendered powerless by the combined weight of hardship, the German oppressor's cunning, and this final betrayal. (48)

Halinka's suicide removes the reminder of this "final betrayal" from the minds of the soldiers, allowing them to regain some power. Halinka's love, not for Madry but for the platoon, provides the impetus for her suicide. Tellingly, the last shot of her focuses on her eyes, open, looking up.

Perhaps the Dantean character to whom Halinka most closely corresponds is St. Lucy, who is mentioned by Beatrice in *Inferno* 2 (97-100) and encountered by Virgil in *Purgatorio* 9 (55-7). Lucy is still venerated by Catholics as the patron saint of the blind because she ripped out her own eyes so that a man distracted by their beauty would be able to focus instead on the beauty of God (Craughwell 167). Halinka stands for this

same attempt to remind Madry of the correct path. Since Madry turns from his wife and children to Halinka, she arguably removes the attraction in order for Madry to succeed in his purgation. While Lucy is retrospectively presented as one of the saints most concerned for Dante's soul, she intercedes in a physical sense only once during his journey. After he falls asleep on the slope overlooking the Valley of the Princes, she lifts him up in her arms and conveys him to the foot of the stairs leading to the Gate of Purgatory Proper. While love is seen as "a source of strength and the wellspring of life" in *Kanał* it is so only if the motivation behind it is selfless. Where Madry's selfish misplaced love leads to despair and betrayal, Halinka's ardent devotion to the platoon expresses itself in a zealously disciplined effort to help everyone in her company escape the sewers.

Wajda also focuses our tropological attention on the love between Korab and Stokrotka, in so far as it corresponds typologically to the love of Dante and Beatrice. One of the first things Stokrotka says to Korab when she returns from her role in the Polish Resistance is to tell him that she is his messenger (00:22:20). Beatrice comes to Dante as a messenger from the Virgin Mary who, along with all the saints, is eager to help him traverse the heavens and unite his soul with God. After Korab is shot in an act of fighting against the Germans, he is weakened and Zadra remarks that for Korab to make the trip through the sewers he "needs two strong men." But it is Stokrotka who volunteers to help him through the sewers. Just as gender inversion occurs frequently in Dante's interactions with Beatrice, Stokrotka follows Beatrice's lead in assuming the powers of a strong masculine saviour. After volunteering to help Korab, Stokrotka remarks to Zadra that "the way is pretty easy" and so the platoon does not need her as their guide (00:40:35). Beatrice is Dante's personal saint and guide through *Paradiso*, just as

Stokrotka becomes Korab's personal guide through the sewers. Stokrotka, as Elzbieta Ostrowska notes,

> brings from the very beginning a clearly defined femininity and sexuality, they can only be revealed when she is looking death 'in the eyes', when Korab is on 'the other side of the bars'. Their single desperate kiss is, as it were, a passage to a different dimension of reality, or fleeting witness to a finite reality they will soon have to leave. (49)

Transcending her earthly role as a lover and guide, Stokrotka becomes Korab's "Kanał" to a higher reality just as Beatrice became Dante's "porta" to the Divine Presence.

To move from Purgatory to Paradise, Dante must first be submerged in the River Lethe and then brought to its companion stream, Eunoe, to taste the pure waters of Grace. The composer Michał alludes to Lethe when he stops with Madry and Halinka to drink from Madry's canteen. Michał states that the water he is drinking is from "Lethe, the river of oblivion" (00:58:55). The water relieves his thirst and its Dantean associations remove him, at least temporarily, from the sewers. As the three continue their journey they come across an escape route from the sewers, and Michał remarks, watching the men and women clamber over each other to climb the ladder: "thither we came, and thence down in the moat I saw a people smothered in a filth that out of human privies seemed to flow" (01:00:15). He is recollecting Dante's glimpse of the Flatterers in Malebolge:

> Quivi venimmo; e quindi giù nel fosso
> vidi gente attuffata in uno sterco
> che da li uman privadi parea mosso.
>
> [We went up, and from there I could see,
> in a ditch below, people plunged in excrement
> that could have come from human privies.] (*Inf.* 18.112-4)

Though the Lethe passage in *Purgatorio* is still fresh in his mind, Michał cannot help but recognize the infernal situation in which he finds himself. Moments after he quotes Dante, however, he asks Madry and Halinka if they can hear the music he is hearing,

saying that everything in the sewers is singing. When Madry responds sarcastically with "yeah, and maybe you're seeing angels too?" (01:02:29) Michał does not respond but instead wanders off in search of the music and presumably the angels Madry has suggested. Music and angels are commonly associated with Purgatory and Paradise.[10] While Michał observes an infernal scene, he prefers to recognize his journey as belonging to a place where he can find angels, music, and the river Lethe—all located on the Holy Mountain.

He glances back at Dante's Hell only once, quoting *Inferno* 18 when he is observing men and women trying to escape from the sewers. While Michał is in the sewers, he recognizes the river of sewage as representing Lethe but an attempt at an escape above ground as a moment worthy of *Inferno*. The descent into the sewers suggests a downwards movement just as Dante fails to climb the hill at the beginning of *Inferno* and therefore must descend into the circles of Hell. In *Kanał*, however, the sewers resonate with *Purgatorio* more than with *Inferno*. Just as Zadra discovers Hell is above the sewers when he escapes with Kula, Michał finds that the world below—for all its infernal appearance—is a route of purgatorial purification and enlightenment.

Countering this reading is Ostrowska's argument that the platoon's descent into the sewers is a move from purgation to chaos. She notes that

> before they descend into the hellish sewers and the silence and horror of the canals, the platoon has to go through the purgatory of witnessing the expulsion from the ghetto: shouts, mayhem, people attacked by German soldiers, and mothers and children running through the fires. (47)

[10] Fallen angels are found in *Inferno*, and an angel is sent to help Dante and Virgil open the gates to the City of Dis, but the fallen angels are not heavenly messengers able to aid souls and the angel who opens the gates does not remain in Hell, showing disgust the entire time he is forced to be there.

This is however the norm for occupied Warsaw and it is not until the victims begin to act like Nazis themselves, without the immediate influence of the Germans, that Michał remarks on their infernal behaviour. While Ostrowska suggests that the purgation happens on the streets of Warsaw, Michał seems to disagree. He also seems to hear music and singing whereas Ostrowska describes the canals as being silent and filled with horror. Ostrowska continues her analysis by noting that the film sequences in the sewers

> take up only half of [the film's] entire length. The film is ideally balanced between the scenes set above- and below-ground. Furthermore, the events in the canals are not merely gruesome wanderings in the dark; they are carefully structured scenes placed around moments of hope and despair. (47)

While *Purgatorio* may aptly be described as a series of "carefully structured scenes placed around moments of hope and despair," the same cannot be said of *Inferno*. Hope is not an option for the Damned, with the notable exception of Virgil who has witnessed the Harrowing and received Beatrice's assurance that she will put in a good word for him with her all-powerful "segnor" (*Inf.* 2.73-4). Michał's references to Lethe and to resonant song strongly suggest that he is looking beyond the sewers to a place of atonement and liberation from despair.

Ostrowska has also noted Michał's unique role as a composer. When Michał is waiting to depart into the sewers, he is asked to play the piano. "In contrast to the distant machine-gun fire, this haunting piano tune is a reminder of a remote past in which life bore some semblance of normalcy," argues Ostrowska: "Amid the general destruction and the filth, Michał's music is ethereal, like an intrusion from another world" (45). Clearly by claiming to hear ethereal music in the sewers, the composer is reprising his role as a

spiritual guide to "another world."[11] Michał's final act is to pass by Korab and Stokrotka as they begin to weaken, as they approach the end of the sewers (01:17:44). This act serves as a reminder to Korab and Stokrotka that they are travelling through the sewers because escape has been promised to them. Michał perceives the sewers as a route towards salvation rather than damnation. The souls he sees clambering to escape strike him as moving backwards to damnation—which he associates with the streets where the Germans act out "the heroism of death" with demonic ferocity, and where the Poles fight each other rather than the Nazi occupiers.

Interpreting *Kanał* as a critique of the heroic conventions of Polish war-films, Ostrowska points out that the

> Romantic tradition of the immaculately dressed and impeccably well-kept warrior has been completely subverted by Wajda, whose soldiers are dirty, weak, and petty; preoccupied with mundane personal affairs and conflicts. Wajda's formulation is quite important in light of the conventional, romanticized view of the uprising, which the film seemingly abrogates. (51)

Wajda wanted to provide the viewer with the "brutal truth of the Warsaw Uprising" (49). He could not do this if he followed the "romantic tradition of the immaculately dressed and impeccably well-kept warrior." In fact, the character who seems to transcend this romanticized view of the Resistance-fighter, commenting on the need for oblivion, is not a soldier at all but the composer Michał. Korab declares that Michał is not a soldier, noting that it would be a "pity to lose an artist" (00:19:40). Korab's recognition of Michał's civilian status (even though he is fighting in the platoon) demonstrates Wajda's rejection of the conventionally idealistic portrayal of the Warsaw Uprising. This

[11] Michał's closest counterpart in the *Commedia* is Orpheus, the musician who descends into Hell to rescue his wife only to fail by turning to look back at the gates when he has been instructed not to turn around. The music Orpheus plays transfixes the Damned whereas Michał's music spurs Korab and Stokrotka forwards. The allusion to Orpheus serves to demonstrate the different purpose Michał serves.

inversion also suggests that Wajda sees nothing strange in identifying the descent through the sewers with *Purgatorio* and the ascent to the streets with *Inferno*.

Wajda's attack on the Romantic idealization of Polish military history can also be sensed in the conversation between Stokrotka and Korab during their trek through the sewers. Korab begins by asking about her life before the resistance and what she wants to do after the war, but Stokrotka refuses to answer (00:50:00-00:51:19). She instead tells him to focus on the goal of their impending journey: release from the sewers. Beatrice also reprimands Dante for focusing on the wrong things when she confronts him at the top of Purgatory:

> . . . "Per entro i mie' disiri,
> che ti menavano ad amar lo bene
> di là dal qual non è a che s'aspiri,
>
> quai fossi attraversati o quai catene
> trovasti, per che del passare innanzi
> dovessiti così spogliar la spene?
>
> E quali agevolezze o quali avanzi
> ne la fronte de li altri si mostraro,
> per che dovessi lor passeggiare anzi?"
>
> [. . . 'In your desire for me
> that guided you to love that good
> beyond which there is nothing left to long for,
>
> 'what ditches or what chains did you encounter
> across your path to make you cast aside
> all hope of going forward?
>
> 'And what profit or advantage showed
> in the face of other things so that you felt
> you must parade yourself before them?'] (*Purg.* 31.22-30)

Korab professes his love for Stokrotka as ardently as Dante did for Beatrice, but like the pilgrim, Korab is focused on the wrong questions. If he followed the advice and example of his beloved, he would direct his efforts to seeking a way out of the sewers and a way

forward in the Resistance. For Stokrotka, being close to death in the sewers is not an excuse for focusing on anything other than the right path. Only through Stokrotka's "impeto" is Korab able to resume the journey through the sewers just as Beatrice's harsh words are what spur Dante back onto the correct path of repentance. Dante is usually able to look beyond worldly distractions simply by gazing into Beatrice's eyes, but in *Kanał* Stokrotka tells Korab that he must focus on the journey and not on her. She leads him along the right path, but for Stokrotka the larger picture is the Resistance and the importance of escaping the sewers to continue that fight. This striking difference provides Wajda with an opportunity to comment on the Resistance Movement as a cause more ennobling (and politically more compelling) than love. His political exaltation of loyalty as a Resistance virtue gains much of its moral force from the typological precedent of Beatrice's first speech to Dante about his disloyalty to her saintly memory (*Purg.* 30.127-35).

When Michał crosses Stokrotka's and Korab's path near the end of the journey, Korab is unable to remember him or the platoon (01:18:17). After Dante has plunged into Lethe and Beatrice confronts him, he is also unable to remember why Beatrice is so angry with him. Beatrice demands an explanation from Dante:

> . . . "Che pense?
> Rispondi a me; ché le memorie triste
> in te non sono ancor da l'acqua offense."
>
> [. . . 'What are you thinking? Speak, for your memories
> of sin have not been washed away by water yet.'] (*Purg.* 31.10-2)

The "memorie triste" are Dante's regretful recollections of his sins. In *Kanał*, however, the "memorie triste" impeding Michał's progress are his recollections of the streets of Warsaw before his entrance into the sewers. By the time Korab exclaims that he cannot

remember a thing, Michał has already become delirious and is beyond salvation, wandering past them without acknowledgement. Stokrotka nevertheless forces him to remember Michał and then tells him to "stop snivelling" when Korab realizes that Michał has been lost (01:18:17). Like Beatrice, Stokrotka insists on the therapeutic need to recover "memorie triste" in order to get over them. Dante and Korab can better understand their current position and the importance of continuing their respective journeys only through remembering. The shame and regretfulness associated with "memorie triste" can only be dispelled by confronting the memories and pushing beyond them.

After Dante returns to the "memorie triste," he is able to repent in front of Beatrice and can then be submerged in Eunoe to cleanse himself of any pain associated with his sins. As Beatrice notes:

> Alto fato di Dio sarebbe rotto,
> se Letè si passasse e tal vivanda
> fosse gustata sanza alcuno scotto
> di pentimento che lagrime spanda."
>
> ['Broken would be the high decree of God
> should Lethe be crossed and its sustenance
> be tasted without payment of some fee:
> his penitence that shows itself in tears.'] (*Purg.* 30.142-5)

Beatrice demands this repentance from Dante by assuming the role of his confessor. After the confession Beatrice takes Dante through Eunoe and up to Paradise with its river of light. When Korab and Stokrotka arrive at the Vistula River, Korab begins to confess his sins to Stokrotka (01:22:42). After serving as his confessor, Stokrotka reassures Korab of his forgiveness by describing what she sees beyond the barred exit from the sewers. In both cases the woman takes on the role of confessor in order to help her male compatriot ascend to the next world. For Dante, the next world is Paradise; and for

Korab, it is death. The love linking the female confessor to the male penitent is only a starting point to move away from the intimacy of the couple towards unification with the entire nation. Korab's repentance and confession symbolize his readiness to pass beyond the world of the living. The confession acts almost as a last rite. Just as Halinka's suicide points upwards Korab's death becomes a way to transcend the horror of the war and to find hope in a moment of despair.

Wajda's desire to unify individuals through a national identity is another way he aligns himself with Dante. Wajda's personal objectives for his role in Polish society as a defender of Poland's political and national identity connect readily with Dante's desire to be the poet-prophet of a united Italy. Bolesław Michałek notes that

> *Kanał* straddles a gulf between the realism of actual events with characters who are reasonably faithful portraits of the mentality and attitudes of the time, and an almost abstract vision of a sealed world whose inhabitants are doomed to extinction. Inevitably a parallel was drawn with Dante's "Inferno" – by Wajda himself as well as reviewers—and it is true that the film is permeated by a virtually unrelieved mood of despair, bitterness and resignation. The whole structure is pivoted on the idea that there is no way out, no hope, no chance of deliverance. As in Dante there is only a succession of narrowing circles of torment. (29-30)

While reviewers were quick to note the obvious parallels between *Kanał* and *Inferno*, Wajda himself pointed to *Purgatorio* as the source of his moral and political inspiration. As previously noted, he intended his film to help the Poles "express their real hopes and desires." If *Kanał* had offered them "no way out, no hope, no chance of deliverance," then it would have been a failure in his eyes. He seems to have concurred with Michałek's judgment that *Kanał* is a striking illustration of "art as purgation."

Wajda is clear that his role as director is to represent Poland and to demonstrate the moral importance of a strong independent national identity. In an interview Wajda stated that

> Poland must be the base from which I work. I will go even further to say that only then can my work have any meaning. I am convinced that Poland will have something to say as regards today's world. Therefore it is important to me to be a director in Poland and to remain involved with that country. (Karpiński 13)

One can see easily then how Dante's *Commedia* would appeal to a man trying to reach the world stage to communicate political ideas about freedom, unity, and peace.

Like Dante, Wajda looks at the world from the perspective of a war-wearied exile. According to John Orr,

> Wajda joined the Home Army, in which he performed the function of a liaison officer (courier), a duty customary for boys of his age. He was nearly arrested by the Germans for these activities, and as a result was forced to flee Radom for Krakow, where he lived for some time; there he continued his involvement in Home Army activities and was again nearly arrested by the Germans. (Crossroads 13)

Wajda's desire to serve Poland caused him to flee his hometown for the sake of survival. While he was able to remain in Poland, he did so at his own risk and was almost arrested in Krakow on one occasion. Rather than abandon his homeland at the hour of her greatest need, he stalwartly joined the Resistance in the hope that Poland would eventually liberate herself from the Nazi regime.

Dante also remains concerned about the direction Italy will take after his exile. The comments or prophecies made in *Inferno*, however, do not lend themselves to hope. The condemned souls who tell Dante-pilgrim of his exile do so only to harm him. In the Circle of the Gluttons, for instance, Ciacco tells the pilgrim about his impending exile only to confuse and worry him. Concerned for the political health of Florence, Dante asks Ciacco to tell him why the factions in their city cannot get along. Instead of offering any solutions to the fractious state of Florentine society, Ciacco tells Dante how his exile

will occur (*Inf.* 6.64-76) in order to make him lose hope. Ciacco's hateful prophecy is expanded by Vanni Fucci in the Bolgia of the Thieves:

> e con tempesta impetüosa e agra
>
> sovra Campo Picen fia combattuto;
> ond'ei repente spezzerà la nebbia,
> sì ch'ogne Bianco ne sarà feruto.
> E detto l'ho perché doler ti debbia!"
>
> [and, with violent and stinging storms,
>
> 'on Campo Piceno the battle shall be joined.
> The headlong bolt shall rend the clouds,
> striking and wounding every White.
> And this I have told that it may make you grieve.'] (*Inf.* 24.147-51)

Struck with impetuous violence himself, Vanni Fucci strikes back at Dante by describing his exile in violent terms.

The prophecies of exile in *Purgatorio* are more hopeful. One can understand why Wajda would turn from *Inferno* to *Purgatorio* for consolation at a time when he was suffering the same political fate as the author of the *Commedia*. On the slopes of Antepurgatory, following a discussion of the consequences of pride, the Ghibelline nobleman Currado Malaspina warns Dante

> "Or va; che 'l sol non si ricorca
> sette volte nel letto che 'l Montone
> con tutti e quattro i piè cuopre e inforca,
>
> che cotesta cortese oppinïone
> ti fia chiavata in mezzo de la testa
> con maggior chiovi che d'altrui sermone,
> se corso di giudicio non s'arresta."
>
> ['Enough. Not seven times
> shall the sun return to rest in the bed
> the Ram covers and bestrides with all four feet
>
> 'before this courteous opinion
> shall be nailed within your brain

> by stronger nails than the words of others,
> if the course of Judgment is not stayed.'] (*Purg.* 8.133-9)

This admonition is not intended to harm Dante. Currado's homily on pride benevolently reassures the pilgrim that his exile is not due to God's decree but to the treacherous machinations of his political enemies. A period of earthly exile will not prevent Dante from ascending to Heaven if he remembers whose decree truly matters. He must use the "maggior chiovi" in order to remain committed to his journey. Provenzan Salvani also cautions Dante not to perceive his exile as a devastating blow, noting that

> Più non dirò, e scuro so che parlo;
> ma poco tempo andrà, che ' tuoi vicini
> faranno sì che tu potrai chiosarlo.
>
> ['I say no more, and know my speech obscure.
> It won't be long before they act, your townsmen,
> in such a way that you'll know how to gloss it.] (*Purg.* 11.139-41)

Before his death Provenzan had repented of his pride and humbly begged for alms in the marketplace of Siena. What Dante learns from his example is that even though his neighbours may act poorly and he may be forced to become a beggar, the actions that truly matter are his own. The moral actions that saved Provenzan from damnation were his own and no one else's. Wajda, while in exile, no doubt recalled the hopeful prophecies of the Purgatorians in order to remind himself that he "must remain involved" with Poland, even if Poland no longer wanted to be involved with him.

For Wajda, national identity is defined by the geography of Poland

> for which one *must* fight. In a country ravaged by partitions, annexations, and wars, the demonstration of national feelings has historically been related to the fight for the country's independence. In the case of Poland, national identity has always had a specific territorial link—after all, Poland has not existed (geographically, at least) for over two hundred years. (Ostrowska 52)

Liberation from Germany then also becomes a struggle to remove the Germans from the nation's borders. This may also be why *Kanał* takes place solely in Warsaw, and why the goal is escape to the center of the city and not out of the city. The beginning of the film has a list of all the locations where the Home Army was fighting against the Germans, reminding viewers that Warsaw is the last standing city of resistance (00:03:03). For Wajda, the Polish Resistance is defined not only by the Poles participating in the resistance but also by the different Polish locations where they are fighting. The close association of national identity with geography is also present in the *Commedia*, especially in *Purgatorio*. When Dante is questioned about who he is by Guido del Duca and Rinieri, he identifies his birthplace in Italy but conceals the name of the river Arno. Guido and Rinieri challenge him to explain why he concealed the river's name and then continue to identify Tuscany through its rivers and mountains and valleys in an attempt to highlight the fallen state of Italy. Guido uses the myth of Circe to remind Dante that the citizens in various communities along the Arno behave more like beasts than men, transforming themselves into pigs, dogs, wolves, and foxes, because they are not worried about the perilous state of their souls. Guido ends the discussion by stating that it will take over a thousand years before the cities along the Arno will be able to recover (*Purg.* 14.29-66). He goes on to complain that Italy has grown so sinful

> . . . che di qui a mille anni
> ne lo stato primaio non si rinselva."
>
> [. . . that not one thousand years
> will make the trees grow green as once they were.'] (*Purg.* 14.65-6)

For Guido, the geography of Italy is momentarily internalized as if the Italians have lost all hope of salvation. But this dire vision does not now include him, for he is an inhabitant of Purgatory and a penitent beyond the borders of despair. Wajda, when

highlighting the different locations that have fallen to the German army, describes his fellow citizens as having fallen in violence and flames just as the souls Guido speaks of are "sanguinose" [covered in blood]. Guido's lament also seems to mirror the plot of *Kanał* on a physical level. The platoon begins on a hill and descends at the end of the film to reconnect with the outside world by arriving at the Vistula River. In the sewers the composer witnesses the disappearance of virtue, first with Madry's attack on the panicking woman and then with his confession of adultery. His subsequent vision of the filthy men and women fighting each other rather than the enemy as they scramble to leave the sewers harks back to Guido's Ovidian vision of the Casentine villagers as

> . . . brutti porci, più degni di galle
> che d'altro cibo fatto in uman uso[.]
>
> [. . . filthy hogs, more fit to feed on acorns
> than on any food that is prepared for men . . . .] (*Purg.* 14.43-4)

They are acting more like animals than human beings and therefore are identified with the sinners of Italy and not with the penitent Purgatorians. When Guido finally laments that "che di qui a mille anni / ne lo stato primaio non si rinselva," a correspondence is suggested between Dante's savagely transformed Italy and Wajda's war-torn Poland. Pre-war Poland has all but receded over the horizon of oblivion. Modern Poland will have to rebuild herself, and it will take a long time before "lo stato primaio" can be restored.

From his purgatorial perspective, Guido still conveys a hopeful message, encouraging Dante-poet to spread word of his conversion so that other sinners may be saved. Wajda also hopes that he will be able to speak to the Polish public and address his concerns about a nation that needs to reunite. Looking back on his early films, he reflected on the political usefulness of his chosen medium:

> cinema helps me perform a particular [political] task. I want the country to submit to certain changes and films can decidedly help. They are very appropriate because, as a violent yet popular form of art, they can convey these ideas better than anything else. (Karpiński 11)

The political films in which Wajda first worked out his vision of Poland's reunification were part of a film movement following World War II. While they are hardly masterpieces, "each of these new films . . . tried to mesh individual experience with the mechanism of the community's destinies and, in so doing, carved out a new place for the cinema" (Michałek 13). As a director Wajda strives to mesh his individual experiences with the mechanism of the community's destinies just as Dante-poet sees himself as the poet-prophet whose unique experiences can help Italy "submit to certain changes" for the sake of unity and peace.

Dante's prophetic invention of the cinema as an aesthetic resolution to the Paragone, the discordant competition between words and images, would surely also have drawn Wajda's directorial attention to *Purgatorio*. When Dante arrives at the terrace of the Proud, he is amazed to find images carved in the marble walls which seem to be speaking to him:

> Colui che mai non vide cosa nova
> produsse esto visibile parlare,
> novello a noi perché qui non si trova.
>
> [He in whose sight nothing can be new
> wrought this speech made visible,
> new to us because it is not found on earth.] (*Purg.* 10.94-6)

The animated figures in the bas-relief provide him with exemplars of humility, and while this particular virtue may not have appealed to Wajda personally, the effect that these moving and speaking images have on Dante would attract the attention of a filmmaker who was looking for a strong way to present his message. Wajda is a fervent supporter of

national cinema and believes in the power of cinema, stating that to sway public opinion on important political issues. "Cinema is not only spoken language," he reminds his viewers: "It is also an art of images" (Orr, Forward xvi). Though Dante depends on language as the medium for conveying allegorical meanings, he is also well aware of the power of visual imagery to communicate divine messages. From his medieval theological perspective, the miraculously mimetic combination of words and images on the white marble wall could only be the work of the Supreme Artist, God. It was not yet a human "arte."

Michałek comments that "the evolution of cinema between *A Generation* in 1955 and *Kanał* in 1957 was, however, quite another thing. Wajda's treatment of the Warsaw Rising and the retreat through the sewers had a definite and deliberate historical and social edge" (30). The narrative from which *Kanał* was developed is described conversely as

> sober, balanced, and frankly sympathetic to the soldiers of the Home Army, though tempered by a streak of scepticism as to the purpose and price of their heroism. A certain critical attitude to the traditional image of Polish heroism forms an undercurrent to much of [Stawinski's] fiction. (Michałek 25)

While the critical attitude to the traditional image of Polish heroism seeks to provoke sympathy for the soldier of the Home Army, Wajda's film instead presents a "deliberate historical and social" message about the acts during the Warsaw Uprising. Michałek continues by stating that Stawinski's narratives "are a fictionalised account of this horrifying, subterranean trek [through the sewers], alternating between hope and despair, through a labyrinth bristling with German booby-traps and stinking of excrement—something of a contemporary vision of hell" (25). *Kanał*, however, seeks to deliver a bolder message than just a "fictionalised account" of the escape Stawinski experienced.

Reflecting on the audaciously allegorical design of *Kanał*, Wajda confirms that while he was directly communicating with Poles about their history he also wanted the rest of the world to contemplate the broad implications of his recreation of the Warsaw Uprising. "It was very important," he explains,

> that our voice was heard on the other side of the Iron Curtain too. We felt then that the Polish cinema had a duty not only to speak about itself but also to communicate with those on the other side in the Cold War. We wanted to speak with the voice of our neighbours who then still did not have their own cinemas or at least were not yet accorded recognition. I think our mission succeeded. Our war films showed the truth about the Polish 'October' in 1956 to those on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and later our films in August 1980 let the world know that something fundamental was happening in Poland. (Orr, Forward xii)

This concern with delivering a message to the world is suggested throughout the film by the many images of pages scattered all over the ground in the streets of Warsaw. At the beginning of the film the ground defended by the platoon is covered with white pages (00:04:50). Then, when Wajda's camera pans over the cemetery, again we see pages littered all over the ground (00:16:00). This recurrent image (so evocative of the Paragone) reassures the viewer that the stories contained in those pages will not be lost: the cinema will preserve them even when all the writings generated by the Resistance have been destroyed. The final scene in the film, just before the fade-out, shows papers blowing across the deserted street where Kula lies murdered (01:35:59). While Stawinski tells his story as a fictionalised account in order to demonstrate the horrors of World War Two, these constant reminders of the written word in the film demonstrate Wajda's concern with telling the truth and sending the message to the world through the film.

While Wajda wanted to present the entire truth, he was not able to represent the Soviet betrayal of the Home Army. The repeated images of papers being tossed around

also remind the viewer that not everything can be gathered together: a completely accurate record of events is not possible. As Falkowska explains:

> The Soviets were expected to aid the Polish insurgents, but instead waited patiently on the other side of the Vistula until the city of Warszawa bled to death. Of course, Wajda could allude only metonymically to the Soviet betrayal: "I could not show that Soviet troops were waiting on the other side of the Vistula River while the Warszawa insurrection died on this side. It was enough that I lead the protagonists of my film to the canal's outlet, from which they could see the other side of the river." (48-9)

While Korab and Stokrotka cannot get to the other side of the Vistula River, the despair of this moment is replaced with hope when Wajda uses this scene as an allusion to the Soviet betrayal. The message of what happened during the insurrection is still delivered in the film, regardless of the protagonists being unable to escape the horrible sewers. Korab and Stokrotka manage to make it on their own to the end of the tunnel, and while they are locked in, their final look out serves as a sign of their ultimate resistance to the German takeover.

Perhaps when directing this final scene, Wajda had Virgil's final instructions to Dante in mind. Having passed through the flames on the Cornice of Lust, Dante is told that he no longer needs his beloved guide; that his will is strong; and that he can be guided by his own purified desires. Here are Virgil's final words to him:

> lo tuo piacere omai prendi per duce;
> fuor se' de l'erte vie, fuor se' de l'arte.
>
> Vedi lo sol che 'n fronte ti riluce;
> vedi l'erbetta, i fiori e li arbuscelli
> che qui la terra sol da sé produce.
>
> Mentre che vegnan lieti li occhi belli
> che, lagrimando, a te venir mi fenno,
> seder ti puoi e puoi andar tra elli.
>
> Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;
> libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,

e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio."

[From now on take your pleasure as your guide.
You are free of the steep way, free of the narrow.

'Look at the sun shining before you,
Look at the fresh grasses, flowers, and trees
which here the earth produces of itself.

'You may sit down or move among these
until the fair eyes come, rejoicing,
which weeping bid me come to you.

'No longer wait for word or sign from me.
Your will is free, upright, and sound.
Not to act as it chooses is unworthy:
over yourself I crown and miter you.'] (*Purg.* 27.131-42)

Like Dante at this culminating moment, Stokrotka and Korab no longer have to struggle along any path but can rest to look at "lo sol che 'n fronte ti riluce" and at "l'erbette, i fiori e li arbuscelli / che qui la terra sol da sé produce." This glance at the sky also anticipates the moment in the film when Halinka kills herself and the camera zooms in on her face, her eyes looking peacefully upwards. Korab and Stokrotka fight until the very end to escape the Ghetto and arrive at the exact point where they can best express their dauntless will to continue fighting the Germans. As the film draws to a close, Wajda suggests that the hope of the heights remains through the continual struggle against the German oppressors. Just as Dante is able to continue his pilgrimage, the Resistance members (even in defeat) carry on their resistance to the Nazis. Stokrotka, Korab, Zadra and Halinka never waver in their quest for freedom or relinquish their hope of escape. They raise themselves morally above their infernal situation. While the descent into the sewers initially recalls Dante's descent in Hell, the undaunted will of the Resistance to

overcome their oppressors by rising morally above them connects *Kanał* in the end more closely to the Christian tropology of *Purgatorio* than to the Classical typology of *Inferno*.

CHAPTER THREE

Provisional Investigations: Peter Weiss's *Die Ermittlung* and Dante's *Paradiso*

Die Ermittlung is a condensed dramatization of the lengthy transcripts generated by the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, which ran from December 10, 1963 to August 10, 1965. The play premiered in Berlin on October 19, 1965 under the slyly ambiguous German title *Die Ermittlung*. Immediately controversial, it was Peter Weiss's sixth work for the stage. As the silent *Ermittler* behind the scenes, working either as a humble "investigator/detective" who dutifully uncovers the facts about Auschwitz in a forensic sense or as a more exalted "ascertainer/determiner" who tries to settle the profoundly disturbing questions raised by the case in an ethical or theological sense, Weiss all but effaced himself as a playwright. Though he had only just recently sprung to international fame with his fourth play, the garrulously playwright-centred *Marat/Sade* (1963), his authorial role in *Die Ermittlung* recalls the critically detached function of a municipal archivist or a documentary filmmaker. By subtitling the play *Oratorium in 11 Gesängen* ("Oratorio in 11 Cantos") he further slyly distanced himself from the stage by implicitly representing himself as a lyrical poet, an obscure librettist who had supplied the text for a vast and wholly imaginary choral work on sacred themes. If "Oratorio" harks back to the masterpieces of Handel and Bach, "Cantos" inevitably conjures up the poetic genius of Dante. Even as the awkward prime number eleven recalls Dante's triumphantly perfect one hundred cantos, it also ironically suggests that Weiss had only been able to supply a small imperfect fragment of a woefully modern *Commedia*.

Dante's *Commedia* had certainly been on Weiss's mind as he contemplated the cultural aftermath of Auschwitz. He had originally conceived *Die Ermittlung* as a

surrealist dialogue between Dante and Giotto, whose shades would have been "discovered" walking through the death-camp intent on making allegorical sense of what they saw around them (Rolleston 8). Would their medieval glosses on Auschwitz have defamiliarized the deadeningly familiar facts attested by the witnesses in the trials, the horrors of the Holocaust serving as signs of the Sadean atheism at the infernal core of Modernity? Or would their Catholic (and inevitably tropological) investigation of the camp have simply revealed the absurdity of reading the terrible minutiae of the Holocaust *sub specie aeternitatis*? We shall never know, since Weiss decided to abandon Dante and Giotto as characters in favour of various actual participants in the trials. Several hundred witnesses were narrowed down to a representative nine, while eighteen of the original twenty defendants filled out the dramatis personae along with one attorney for the defence, one for the prosecution, and one judge.

As scattered references in his notes and essays attest, Weiss turned to *Paradiso* rather than to *Inferno* as the poetic model for structuring the polyphonic "cantos" of his investigation. Counterintuitive as this intertextual move may seem, it was hardly arbitrary. As Robert Cohen has argued, Hell was for Weiss "the place of the powerful, the rulers, the exploiters, the repressors, and the torturers", while Purgatory was "the place of contemporary battles...of doubts and contradictions" and Paradise "the place of the victims, 'the blessed...who are still waiting for their liberation'" (79). Clearly siding with the witnesses at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, Weiss projected onto them the vigilant role of Dante's Blessed. Not only the martyrs but all the saints in *Paradiso* look down on the World as its "victims" from a Boethian perspective: their liberation from the coils of history will not be complete until Fortune's wheel stops turning at the end of time. As long as the saints feel compassion for sinners and intervene on their behalf, as

Lucy and Beatrice have done for Dante, even the most contemplative of the Heavenly Host will be intensely engaged with the World as moral "investigators" forever primed to become what we would now call "activists" for social justice.

Weiss personally attended the trials and published his investigation as a script while the judge was still hearing testimony. As a production, *Die Ermittlung* opened a little over two months after the final verdicts had been read. By concealing this background information from the audience and by omitting the sentencing phase of the trials, Weiss strategically foregrounded the victimized witnesses and drew attention away from the infernal "repressors" and "torturers" who had hitherto been spotlit by sensational media accounts of *der Auschwitz-Prozess*. In so far as the witnesses offer their testimony in hopes of liberation from the injustice delivered to them in Auschwitz, *Die Ermittlung* is dramatically aligned with the politics of collective intervention and hierarchical subversion radically proposed by Dante's intercessors in *Paradiso*.

Despite Weiss's explicit remarks on the genesis of *Die Ermittlung*, critics have had a hard time accepting his choice of *Paradiso* as the model for the play.[12] Hamida Bosmajian, for instance, prefers to read *Inferno* into it:

> Structurally, *The Investigation* is akin to the *Inferno* in its division of thirty-three cantos subdivided by eleven subjects. The thirty-fourth canto of the *Inferno* is not needed, aside from the numerical balance, because the previous life of the inmates is not of interest. Any wrong they may have committed is irrelevant to their imprisonment. A further parallel with the *Inferno* is the movement of the oratorium from the periphery of the ramp to the center of destruction, the fiery ovens where the person was totally obliterated. In the icy circles of Caina, the damned were forever frozen in their individuality, but in Auschwitz those designated as damned simply vanished. (172)

[12] Critics have tended to forget our at least to ignore Weiss's authorship of a play entitled *Inferno* (1964). He clearly regarded *Die Ermittlung* as a separate endeavour from the usual Modernist project of rewriting Dante's *Inferno*.

While correctly noting that *Die Ermittlung* has thirty-three sections comparable to the canto divisions of the descending journey in *Inferno*—minus the *smarrimento* canto—Bosmajian oddly ignores the two subsequent cantiche in which a thirty-fourth canto does not need to be explained away. If "the previous life of the inmates is not of interest," as she claims, why does Weiss focus on the testimony of witnesses who must look back almost twenty years for the time of their victimization in Auschwitz? Equally puzzling is the analogy she draws between Caina and the Auschwitz crematoria. Surely no two final destinations could be more dissimilar than the frozen lake of the Ninth Circle where guilty souls are forever preserved and the fiery ovens of the death camp where innocent victims were once "totally obliterated."

Sensing a Dantean design behind the cyclical repetition of experiences recalled by the witnesses in the play, Bosmajian goes on to argue that in "the final three cantos about the fiery ovens, *Die Ermittlung* returns to the ramp, the beginning of the victims' experience which was repeated so many times in the history of the camps" (180). Does Dante return to the beginning of his journey at the end of *Inferno*? No, it is at the end of *Paradiso* that he whirls back to earth to gather his memories like Sybil's leaves into the grand cyclical design of the Sacred Poem. Like Dante, Weiss's witnesses return from a difficult journey and are bravely impelled to tell about it. Consider for instance the testimony of the second witness. While answering a question about his transfer to the main camp at Auschwitz, he notes that he almost did not get out of the camp because he did not have his pass with him (Weiss 123). Dante is only able to return after he passes the tests the saints demand of him so that he can stand before the Divine Judge in the Empyrean without fear of death or damnation. Similarly Weiss's witnesses must face a judge before they can escape the despair of the death camp again—this time as a

Reflecting on the mimetic rationale for the *contrapasso* within Dante's representation of the divine justice system, Anthony K. Cassell observes that "from the descent into Hell, through the Exodus of the ascent and purgation of the second realm, to the promised land of Heaven, the Wayfarer's journey is indeed made allegorically in imitation of Christ's baptism, 'to fulfil all justice'" (13). If the promise of justice is thunderously affirmed anywhere to Dante's universe, it is in Paradise; mere echoes of that affirmation are heard in Hell and Purgatory. The victims of the crematoria, then, are identified in *Die Ermittlung* with the blessed justice-seekers in *Paradiso*. Like the saints at the Last Judgment, the witnesses at the Frankfurt trials do not waver in their faith that justice will ultimately prevail in condemning the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

A Dantean reading of the elaborate *dispositio* of the play has also been proposed by Erika Salloch, who provides the following rationale for Weiss's structural use of the numbers eleven and thirty-three:

> Dante uses this structure to symbolize the harmonious, symmetrical world system which God has created (the prologue to the "Inferno" raises the total number of cantos to the mystical figure 100). Weiss mixes this harmonic scheme with the indivisible 11. He could not have kept the harmonious scheme of the *Divina Commedia*, because the play, *The Investigation*, is open-ended without solution. (5)

In contrast to Bosmajian, Salloch reads the structure of the play as an unsettling conflation of infernal irregularity and paradisial symmetry. The awkward indivisibility of eleven clashes with the theologically irresistible divisibility of thirty-three: a discord left unresolved by the open-endedness of the play. "The region of Purgatorio," she convincingly argues, "is not a part of *The Investigation* because it has 'motion, the thought of change' (Vorübung, p. 137), reflecting Dante's description of Purgatorio, in

which the soul of man can purge its guilt and grow worthy" (3). While the witnesses speak out against the criminal actions of the defendants in the camps, the defendants' actions in the play do not suggest that they are interested in purging guilt or even admitting it. Instead, after the defendants hear or answer an accusation, they frequently laugh together at the words spoken against them. Since the past cannot be changed, the defendants have no way to progress in a purgatorial sense without accepting or admitting their guilt.

Moving against the interpretive current initiated by Bosmajian and Salloch in the 1970s, Fabian Lampart has recently striven to read *Die Ermittlung* as a Modernist *Paradiso* in accordance with Weiss's statements of authorial intent. The third cantica pervades the play, he argues, because of Weiss's effort "to establish the topography of the *Divina Commedia* in a historical present" (294). In the historical present of the dramatized trials, "Paradise becomes the place where sinners and victims live together" (294). In sharp contrast of Dante's *Inferno*, which casts us down into a private theatre of cruelty, Weiss's *Paradiso* opens up for us a public forum where "it is possible to tell the truth about the culprits, to find the words with which their crimes can be marked" (294). Early in the trial, Defendant Fifteen notes that he has developed health problems from dealing with the stress of having to account for his actions at Auschwitz:

> Your Honour
> all I would really like to do here
> is make a clean breast of everything
> It has been troubling me deeply for years
> I have developed heart trouble
> from all the worry
> And then they have to foul up the last years of my life
> with this whole stinking mess [.] (Weiss 131)

After denying his responsibility for the death of any inmate in Auschwitz, he petulantly expresses a wish to confess his sins but then rears back and blames the witnesses for his "heart trouble / from all the worry." The judge responds sarcastically to the defendant's mention of "this whole stinking mess" by refusing to suppose that he is referring "to the proceedings / instituted by the prosecution" (131). Since the defendant is only acting the part of a penitent sinner, the judge clearly wishes to expose the insincerity of his confession and sternly points out that the trial in which Defendant Fifteen is involved is to be taken seriously. Here Weiss makes sure that the defendant exposes his own guilt through his mockery of confession.

The humiliating exposure of the guilty is the primary function of the *contrapasso* in the Dantean justice system, and it often takes the form of a parodic re-enactment of their guilt-inducing deeds. According to Cassell, we as readers

> satisfy our quest to understand the *contrapasso* in the *Inferno* when we see not only that the 'punishment fits the crime' but that it is, in all cases, more profoundly, a strict manifestation of the sin as guilt. By tracing the underlying patristic concepts, we can understand that the suffering represents an exteriorizing of the wickedness and corruption that lurks within the souls of the sinners. (9)

Unfortunately the defendants in the play seem unable to feel any guilt even when they go through the motions of confession. Just as Dante's readers must strive to recognize what the Damned are forced to expose in their punishments, so Weiss's audience must detect the notes of self-accusation in the defendants' self-excusing testimony. Continuing his discussion of guilt, Cassell notes how Dante's Damned are "punished by becoming unchangeable in their iniquity; the disorder of their wills, responsible for their damnation, remains in them throughout eternity; for them goodness is no longer possible" (9). Whereas the wills of the Purgatorians strain to return to God, the Damned resist this

natural impulse because they are trapped within their guilt-ridden egos. By denying their culpability, the Nazis remain similarly "unchangeable in their iniquity."

The plea for justice resounds throughout *Paradiso*. In the Heaven of Jupiter, for instance, Dante urges all the just souls forming the celestial Eagle to pray for the sinners on earth, so that they may acknowledge their guilt and contritely renounce the bad examples they have followed:

> O milizia del ciel cu' io contemplo,
> adora per color che sono in terra
> tutti sviati dietro al malo essemplo!
>
> Già si solea con le spade far guerra;
> ma or si fa togliendo or qui or quivi
> lo pan che 'l pïo Padre a nessun serra.
>
> [O soldiery of Heaven, whom I contemplate,
> pray for those still on the earth,
> those led astray by bad example!
>
> It was the custom once to go to war with swords.
> Now wars are fought withholding here and there
> the bread our loving Father keeps from none.] (*Par.* 18.124-9)

If the Nazi regime is taken as the modern paradigm of the "malo essemplo," then this Dantean prayer resonates with Weiss's urgent plea on behalf of all the victims—a plea intensified by the cumulative testimony of the witnesses—that the defendants acknowledge their guilt and experience true penitence. Dante-poet "tells the truth about the culprits" when he prays for the sinners who steal bread and fight dishonourably. Only when Dante-pilgrim is presented with the "milizia del ciel" is he able to utter this prayer, and only in *Paradiso* can he find this "milizia." Similarly, Weiss constructs a collective prayer for justice out of the diverse truths told about the Nazi oppressors by the survivors of Auschwitz who, like the heavenly militia, refuse to be daunted by the earthly spectacle of justice denied and justice perverted.

Following Salloch's argument that Weiss's comprehension of the *Commedia* causes a conflation of *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, Lampart notes that "the topographic organisation of the drama combines the structure of Dante's *Inferno* with that of the *Paradiso*, according to Weiss's conviction that in a post-Holocaust world even in heaven, redemption cannot be found. With this topographic framework, the drama attempts to give a contemporary response to the language of Dante" (295). But does Weiss ultimately succumb to the Modernist temptation (rooted in Blake and ritualized by Pound) to marry Heaven and Hell? From the strict perspective of Dantean tropology, Paradise cannot be collapsed into the Inferno without a total loss of the Truth. This conflation may be imagined as an allegory of the poets, a mere fiction. But it cannot be sustained as a truth-telling allegory of the theologians. Weiss is not prepared to abandon the Truth either as a dramatic goal or as a theological concept. While the defendants mock the witnesses, the witnesses are still able to speak out against their mockers; they are still able to speak Truth (their version of it at least) to Power. Consequently, Weiss is not concerned with the earthly verdicts; he does not include the sentencing in the play or criticize the outcomes of *der Auschwitz-Prozess* as too soft. In the end the defendants are left waiting for God's—or the audience's—verdict on their crimes.

If we are not to wait for the judge's verdict at the play, then what is the point of Weiss's investigation of justice in *Die Ermittlung*? Here is Tammis Thomas's cogent answer to this question:

> Although Weiss includes brief speaking parts for judges, prosecutors, defence attorneys, and outside witnesses, the play unfolds as an uneven dialectic of victim assertions and perpetrator denials. On the most obvious level the perpetrators' adamant expressions of denial represent attempts by the perpetrators and the larger post-war German culture to deny the crimes of the Nazi past. The strength of the perpetrators' continuously adamant denials in response to the relative weakness of the victims' testimonial narratives has

> also been interpreted as an attempt by the defendants in the courtroom to reproduce the dynamics of persecution created by the perpetrators in the camp. (578)

Thomas is correct to point out that the defendants' "adamant expressions of denial" seem to weaken the witnesses' statements. The defendants outnumber the witnesses two to one in *Die Ermittlung*, thus making the defendants seem to have more vocal support than their accusers. However, the witnesses are given much more time to speak than the defendants. A statistical analysis of the allocation of lines to characters in the play confirms that the witnesses are given thirty-six percent of the speeches and the judge thirty-two percent. The defendants, prosecutors, and defence attorneys are given sixteen percent, ten percent, and six percent respectively. In condensing the trial into the play, Weiss has ensured that the witnesses and the judge, while outnumbered by the defendants, deliver sixty-eight percent of the dialogue. Their order in the sequence of speakers also gives them prominence in comparison with the defendants. The judge speaks first in the play; then five of the nine witnesses give testimony; the four remaining witnesses speak out before the end of the first canto. The speeches of the attorneys and the eighteen defendants are then distributed throughout the rest of the play. In Weiss's adaptation of the transcripts, the witnesses are more often questioned by the judge than by the attorneys. In one instance, the seventh witness claims to have seen the defendants Stark, Hofmann, Kaduk and Baretzki at the crematoria and the counsel for the defence interrupts the witness's testimony to call attention to the fact that these defendants deny their participation. The judge chooses to ignore the interruption from the counsel for the defence and asks the witness to continue his account of the events (Weiss 280). The judge is concerned with hearing what the witnesses have to say, not the denials of the

defence. Clearly choosing not to participate in Holocaust-denial, Weiss has striven instead to let the truth be spoken without interruption.

According to Cassell, the judicial goal of the *Commedia* "is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery and to bring them to a state of happiness" (5). Weiss's specific concern for the victims is ethically in tune with Dante's general concern for everyone "living in this life." In both cases the desire of the writer is to turn misery into happiness, which is not likely to happen on earth but will be a perpetual outcome of justice in Heaven. In sharp contrast to the Damned, whose misery in the Inferno is a direct consequence of their failure to align their individual wills with the Divine Will, the victims of the Holocaust did not deserve their misery and no exercise of their wills, either individually or collectively, could have saved them from their doom.

Another reason for doubting that Weiss's intent in the play was to conflate *Inferno* with *Paradiso* has been suggested by David L. Pike, who points out that hope all but flickers out in the first cantica only to blaze forth like a newly created star in the third. Weiss's *Paradiso* is "Dante's recapitulation of *Inferno* as the story of the victims, with hope always in the background" (90). This redemptive reading is at odds with Lampart's conclusion that Weiss does not believe in redemption at all. For the defendants no earthly punishment may ever truly fit their crimes, but for the witnesses the judicial process itself has revived and sustained hope that the truth of their words will be heard and the guilt of the defendants proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Dante's great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida can also look back on a tumultuous past with a steady moral gaze and not fall into the trap of despair. Felled as a Crusader, he describes his violent death to Dante with Boethian equanimity:

"Quivi fu' io da quella gente turpa

> disviluppato dal mondo fallace,
> lo cui amor molt'anime deturpa;
> e venni dal martiro a questa pace."
>
> ['There was I freed by that foul race
> from all the snares of the deceitful world—
> the love of which corrupts so many souls—
> and came from being martyred to this peace.'] (*Par.* 15.145-8)

While the Infidels who killed him must continue their unholy war against God in the lower circles of the Inferno, he has escaped not only their "foul race" but also their eternal restlessness. He is now at peace. If *Die Ermittlung* truly mirrors *Paradiso*, then Cacciaguida's experience of "pace" as a blessed release from the murderous rage (if not the memory) of war must also be a state that the witnesses at the trial may devoutly hope to attain. If *Die Ermittlung* were to mirror *Inferno*, then there would be no hope for the witnesses. The words of the witnesses would not matter; only the testimony of the defendants would "count" (in an allegorical sense) as evidence of the godless battlefield on which humanity now finds itself. According to Cassell, Dante's God judges the Damned in order to sustain the hopes of the penitent in the moral order of the universe. The design of the *Commedia* accordingly

> reflects the form of justice which, as Dante believed, obtained before the Coming of Christ who made possible man's reconciliation with heavenly grace and mercy through faith, hope, and the love of God and neighbour. Those who reject these virtues are fittingly condemned to dwell forever in a realm where Christ's merciful New Dispensation and Law hold no place. (3)

The Dantean design of the play reveals that the defendants live without faith or hope, having abandoned their love of God and neighbour. Though the victims were persecuted for their faith and their love of God, they suffered to hold onto hope even in the darkest days of the camps. From Weiss's Cacciaguidan viewpoint the Jewish survivors of Auschwitz are the new martyrs who deserve some kind of redemption—if not a Christian

one based on Christ's merciful New Dispensation, then perhaps a surrogate deliverance provided by the investigative powers of the theatre.

Might *Paradiso* have also provided Weiss with a rhetorical model for the articulation of difficult truths about the inhumanity unleashed by human history? Definitely, contends Katja Garloff in her reading of Weiss's notes:

> . . . topographical precision and a factual, detailed language were to mark the witnesses' discourse. "The Investigation (*Paradiso*)—asks with extreme exactness about every single detail, again and again—Did they come from the right? Where was the door? What did it look like? (Nb, 282); "above all in *Paradiso*: very simple, short sentences; extreme austerity; crucial, concrete details" (Nb, 255). Another note reinforces the idea that heaven and hell were to represent two different discursive spaces, allowing for two different modes of speech: lies, evasions, and rationalizations in hell, contrasted with clear exactness in heaven (Nb, 216). Given that Weiss intended to rewrite Dante's *Divine Comedy* from a radically secular perspective, rejecting the possibility of otherworldly compensation for earthly suffering, it seems consistent that the victims' testimonies figure as the sole substitute for paradisiacal redemption. (91)

Weiss recognizes that factual narration can be trusted in *Paradiso*, but not in *Inferno*. Cassell makes a similar observation, noting that Dante's education in Hell contrasts sharply with what (and how) he learns in Purgatory and Paradise:

> . . . the Wayfarer falls into error through his own mistaken conceptions, and, while in Paradise, his misconceptions are directly corrected by heavenly teachers, only in Hell is he led intentionally into error by lying demons and shades. (14)

The defendants' constant denials and the defence counsel's efforts to confuse the witnesses make the jury's education difficult to comprehend. While the trial does not provide any "heavenly teachers," the witnesses are sure of their statements and speak as concisely and correctly as possible. They also speak clearly, without harsh accusations towards the defendants, just as Cacciaguida softens his accusations of the "gente turpa" who killed him, choosing to celebrate his liberation from earth instead. The "lies,

evasions, and rationalizations" that belong in Hell can be seen in an exchange between the eighth witness and the counsel for the defence. When the eighth witness refers to the Boger swing, the counsel for the defence states that the witness himself survived the swing and therefore "it was possible / to survive it after all" (Weiss 171). The witness had stated earlier that the swing meant death. By taking the words of the witness quite literally, in an absolute sense, the counsel for the defence tries to undermine the authority of the witness through a sophistic process of rationalization. Hell is the place where harsh accusations are heard and words are twisted to suit cruel means. Sophistry is condemned in Paradise (*Par.* 11.1-3).

Garloff, however, is incorrect to think that Weiss rejects "otherworldly compensation for earthly suffering." When the second witness is speaking, the counsel for the defence feels the need to state that "this witness has already/served his sentence/and he cannot be tried here again" (249). The witness feels compelled to respond, explaining that he still considers himself innocent despite his sentencing. Even this witness, who has previously been identified as a perpetrator, is unable to admit guilt. While earthly justice prevents him from being retried for his crimes in Auschwitz, hope remains that any justice left undone will be accomplished later through the truthful testimony of the witnesses in the play. The second witness may speak the truth but has not yet answered for his actions. The play effectively condemns him because the court has failed to do so.

While Weiss may hope for "otherworldly compensation for earthly suffering," he does not rely on that concept and wants the reader to understand that the witnesses speak the truth. Regardless of how difficult the facts may be to hear, they are part of the world's history. Cohen explains that

> to come to an understanding of Weiss's play, the reader or spectator also has to abandon the belief that the world of concentration camps remains incomprehensible. What happened in Auschwitz needs to be placed in a historic continuum whose roots can be traced in history and which, in a different form, might conceivably happen again. (95)

Weiss writes the play in hopes that the readers and spectators recognize that without diligence the events in Auschwitz "might conceivably happen again." The witnesses even struggle in *Die Ermittlung* not to fall into the role of disbeliever when asked about events in the camps. The first witness is unable to believe the rumour that the inmates he saw being shipped through his rail yard were destined for extermination (Weiss 121). The witness's presence at the trial, however, is a statement of the possibility of the extermination. If the rumours could not have been substantiated, then the trial would not be possible since there would be no criminals to prosecute.

Like Dante in the opening tercets of *Paradiso*, Weiss is deeply concerned with the unreliability of memory to establish the facts about an extraordinary set of experiences. Yet his play sets out to investigate the facts about Auschwitz twenty years after the war and to champion a group of witnesses who may not be able to remember all the traumatic details of their incarceration. C. W. E. Bigsby, however, explains that "Peter Weiss chose to give prominence not to documents but to the testimony of those who had been in the camps, as guards and prisoners. If the past is preserved in documents, albeit documents provided by those who might be thought to have motives for distorting them, then it is preserved in another sense by the memories of those who were present" (152). While the memories may be imperfect, they preserve the events without the "motives for distorting them." The witnesses speak from what they believe is the heart of their truth—even if their memories have failed to capture every moment in Auschwitz. If the witnesses are not telling lies, then their testimony preserves some part of the history of Auschwitz. The

hazy boundary between lying and truth-telling is examined by Beatrice on the verge of Dante's dreamlike ascent to the Tenth Heaven:

> sì che là giù, non dormendo, si sogna,
> credendo e non credendo dicer vero;
> ma ne l'uno è più colpa e più vergogna.
>
> ['Thus down there men are dreaming while they wake,
> believing that they speak the truth. And those
> who don't believe so share the greater guilt and shame.] (*Par.* 29.82-4)

While those men who "credendo e non credendo" are to blame for spreading lies, the ones who do not believe share "più colpa e più vergogna." The defendants constantly try to deny their knowledge of the events, saying that they could not believe what was being said about Auschwitz; even those defendants who had direct contact with the prisoners seem to report this. The witnesses, however, even while testifying to things that occurred in a slightly different manner, believe they are speaking the truth and seek only to tell the truth. Therefore, from a paradisial standpoint, even when their memories have distorted the truths documented in their testimony, the witnesses have less "colpa" and less "vergogna" than the defendants. The defendants knew that what was happening was not correct but chose to ignore the facts and lie at the trial saying that they could not believe what they heard because the rumours seemed impossible. Weiss surely recognized the distorting power of disbelief in the *Commedia,* especially in *Inferno*. The reader of the *Inferno*, "though tempted by the perverted 'humanity' of the damned, [is] forced to choose between the bewildering, often glossy, image of sin which they conjure up, and the truth, the very justice of the contrapasso" (Cassell 14). While Dante confronts this overwhelming contradiction in a poem about the afterlife, Weiss does not have access to mystical experience and therefore uses the Auschwitz Trial to expose and condemn the

same kind of infernal incomprehension and lack of empathy in the citizens of post-War Germany.

Since Weiss is hoping for eternal justice and not the justice that may be found during the trial, then the purpose of *Die Ermittlung* is not to identify how each of the defendants received the appropriate punishment for their crimes. Bigsby suggests that the "trial constituted one of those moments in which a judicial process mattered less for its ability to mediate between innocence and guilt than for its revelatory power" (159). The facts of the trials, the testimony of the witnesses, the forced recollection of painful events are what matter to Weiss as a playwright. The immediate political function of his play is to engage a wider public audience than the original courtroom observers in the thrust and parry of *der Auschwitz-Prozess*. When asked whether he wanted to punish the audience by lobbing the harsh words of the witnesses at them, he responded like a patient teacher facing a difficult class of sleepy or distracted students: "listen very carefully and be completely awake, not hypnotized, absolutely alive, answering all the questions in the play" (Gray 113). If he sounds here remarkably like Beatrice demanding total attention from her easily overwhelmed student—

> Apri la mente a quel ch'io ti paleso
> e fermalvi entro; ché non fa scïenza
> sanza lo ritenere, avere inteso . . .
>
> ['Open your mind to what I now explain
> and fix it in your memory, for to hear
> and not remember does not lead to knowledge . . .] (*Par*. 5.40-2)

—we should not be surprised, given Weiss's deep engagement with Dante-pilgrim's pedagogical process at the literal level of *Paradiso*. Beatrice instructs Dante not only to learn from what he hears but also to desire knowledge, to ask hard questions because he yearns for profound understanding. In *Paradiso*, Dante has no time to float idly above

the earth with an occasional disengaged glance back at the mad rout of history. Like the saints he is constantly engaged with the moral conflicts of his age. Weiss is also asking this of his audience. Whereas in *Inferno* Virgil instructs Dante to hurry along and not ask too many questions (*Inf.* 17.37-9), and in *Purgatorio* Belacqua demonstrates that physical inaction does not mean he is not purging his sins (*Purg.* 4.127-9), Dante's main action in *Paradiso* is acquiring knowledge through an investigative witnessing of what has hitherto been hidden from most of humanity. Such is also the main action for the audience and actors caught up in Weiss's investigation of Auschwitz.

His avoidance of the sentencing phase of the *Prozess* suggests another Dantean motivation for writing the play. Just as Dante urges his readers to demand justice in the Here and Now instead of waiting for it in the Hereafter, so Weiss impels his audience to investigate the trial system itself, to see how it can be radically improved to answer the cries for justice from the witnesses. Perhaps this impulse turns *Die Ermittlung* into a drama of moral rehabilitation, a kind of social therapy. So thinks Bosmajian: "the hope for an epiphany of law and justice, the final cause of a trial, has faded and been largely replaced by the therapeutic process of the trial as a demonstration or show aiming to raise the consciousness and conscience of the world rather than of the criminal" (147). Such a reading effectively turns the play into Weiss's *Purgatorio*. If it truly is his *Paradiso*, however, then something far more transfigurative and world-reforming must be going on in it than a merely "therapeutic" restoration of sanity after the madness of Auschwitz. It must promise the audience a new and inspiring vision of justice operating in the world even if the playwright can provide only a partial glimpse of that vision, an anticipatory "ascertainment" of it, as an illuminating impetus towards hope. Such a glimpse is all that Dante-poet promises his readers in the opening tercets of *Paradiso*:

> La gloria di colui che tutto move
> per l'universo penetra, e risplende
> in una parte più e meno altrove.
>
> Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende
> fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire
> né sa né può chi di là sù discende . . .
>
> [The glory of Him who moves all things
> pervades the universe and shines
> in one part more and in another less.
>
> I was in that heaven which receives
> more of His light. He who comes down from there
> can neither know nor tell what he has seen . . .] (*Par.* 1.1-6)

After ritually intoning the routine scholastic dictum that God's glory pervades the universe, the poet snaps us to attention with a surprising declaration that he has personally experienced that glory in all its fullness but cannot—on his own—tell us about what he cannot—on his own—know about it. That the third cantica flows from this admission of failure "proves" that the Divine Source of the glory has illumined his mind and inspired his words. His primary goal in *Paradiso*, then, is to raise the consciousness of his readers beyond the dense inglorious obstructions of the Fallen World so that the glorious operation of the Divine Justice system can be visible to more than the saints who witness it in the Empyrean.

While Weiss is not interested in unveiling the full glory of God to his audience, he does share with Dante the activist goal of spreading not just the words of the witnesses but their unshaken hope in the moral order of the universe, in the prevailing of justice through the world. For the playwright, as for the poet, this process is anything but a top-down fascistic imposition of homogenizing order on the unruly diversity of the world. That was what the Nazis promised their adherents. Quite the reverse: it must be a just

order that embraces human diversity. So the active (and activist) soul of Justinian explains to Dante in the Heaven of Mercury:

> addolcisce la viva giustizia
> in noi l'affetto sì, che non si puote
> torcer già mai ad alcuna nequizia.
>
> Diverse voci fanno dolci note;
> così diversi scanni in nostra vita
> rendon dolce armonia tra queste rote.
>
> [living justice sweetens our affection
> we cannot ever then take on
> the warp of wickedness.
>
> 'Differing voices make sweet music.
> Just so our differing ranks in this our life
> create sweet harmony among these wheels.] (*Par.* 6.121-6)

The souls in *Paradiso* create "dolce armonia" because they celebrate justice both individually and collectively. Cassell has noted that Satan and his infernal empire "separate the realm of Old Testament eye-for-an-eye justice from the purgatorial realm of Grace and Justification" (104). Paradise is the perpetual synthesis of Church and Empire under the rule of Grace. For Weiss, however, "nequizia" is clearly evident in the testimony of the witnesses. The "diverse voci" who make "dolci note" in Paradise are comparable to the witnesses because they are able to recount their diverse experiences of injustice and moral failure (even Justinian recalls his lapse into heresy) without losing hope in the ultimate triumph of justice over Satanic tyranny. Since Weiss mixes the testimonies of the witnesses together, he has already begun the harmonizing process.

While Justinian's choristers, like all the saints in *Paradiso*, are unimpeded by doubt in their celebration of God's justice, the witnesses in *Die Ermittlung* are still unsure that justice will be served by the all-too-human process unfolding in the courtroom. Still victimized by the Nazi atrocities committed two decades earlier, many of them "reflect on

the possibilities and the limits of testimony in the case of witnesses who, in contrast to the interviewed survivors, lack a sympathetic audience or, worse, who speak in front of a decidedly unsympathetic audience" (Garloff 86). Justinian's choristers do not have to worry about a "decidedly unsympathetic audience" since all the Heavenly Host gladly participate in the operations of God's justice. They are all united by a common interest in the fulfilment of the Divine Plan. By contrast, back on earth, caught up in the give-and-take of a complicated legal process extended over a series of trials, Weiss has every reason to worry that a reluctant (if not entirely unsympathetic) audience of secular Germans who would prefer to put the War behind them will not allow for an objective hearing of the victims' painful testimonies. The saints themselves are keenly aware of how difficult the achievement of objectivity is for mortal minds, as Thomas Aquinas reminds Dante in the Heaven of the Sun:

> perch' elli 'ncontra che più volte piega
> l'oppinïon corrente in falsa parte,
> e poi l'affetto l'intelletto lega.
>
> Vie più che 'ndarno da riva si parte,
> perché non torna tal qual e' si move,
> chi pesca per lo vero e non ha l'arte.
>
> ['since it often happens that a hasty opinion
> inclines one to the erring side, and then
> fondness for it fetters the working of the mind.
>
> 'He who casts off from shore to fish for truth
> without the necessary skill does not return the same
> as he sets out, but worse, and all in vain.] (*Par.* 13.118-23)

Notice how Aquinas champions the disciplined use of the intellect in an ideally calm process of decision-making, contrasting it with an uncritical acceptance of "l'oppinïon corrente" which leads to hasty conclusions and inevitable errors of judgment. No doubt this paradisial critique of undisciplined thinking haunted Weiss as he pondered what a

trial ought to be: the rational analysis of objectively determined evidence leading through due process to a just decision. Fallen human nature, Aquinas warns, is bound to pervert this process. Should we abandon our vision of what the trial ought to be when its historical unfolding fails to measure up to the ideal? Obviously not, Aquinas insists. Perfect rationality has to be imagined before it can be enacted as a judicial process—tried out, however tentatively—in the messy Here and Now.

For Weiss, "the invocation of Dante . . . was a reflection of that desire to imagine salvation, albeit one denied by a seemingly resistant human nature" (Bigsby 174). If Dante can envision a realm where justice, objectivity, and rationality can coexist, even at a time when human nature seemed especially resistant to them, then the witnesses in Weiss's play might also have a chance to imagine such a realm through the intercession of an impetuously hopeful author.

The critical investigation of easy answers and erroneous assumptions is a recurrent action on the literal level of *Paradiso*. In the First Heaven, for instance, Beatrice tests the limits of unaided human reason by asking Dante to explain the dark spots on the Moon (*Par*. 2.52-8). Dante's answer, based on the materialist assumptions of natural philosophy, is tested and proved incorrect in light of Beatrice's revelation about the spiritual causes underlying material phenomena. Their exemplary pedagogical interaction effectively demonstrates how answers to hard questions can be determined with magisterial rationality and objectivity. At the start of *Die Ermittlung*, Weiss seeks to engage the audience in just such an interaction:

> This condensation [of the trial transcripts into the script for the play] should contain nothing but facts. Personal experience and confrontations must give way to anonymity. Inasmuch as the witnesses in the play lose their names, they become mere anonymous voices. The nine witnesses sum up what hundreds expressed. (Weiss 118)

Since Beatrice is telepathically connected to the Divine Mind and thence to Aquinas and all the other celestial intellects, her reasoning is perfectly consonant with the thought processes that move the sun and the other stars. It is not really *her* reasoning at all but the unified intellection of the Heavenly Host. Weiss moves towards this collectivity of thought by making the nine witnesses speak "what hundreds expressed."

By not naming the witnesses, Weiss casts them in the role of anonymous representatives of the many who saw the atrocities at Auschwitz but either did not survive the camps or were too traumatized after liberation to speak out about their experiences. Though the witnesses offer individual testimony, their presence in the play recalls that of a chorus in Greek tragedy. Their function is to comment on a catastrophe by proclaiming what happened off stage beyond the audience's range of vision or knowledge. Only the defendants are named in *Die Ermittlung*. They are named by the witnesses in their testimony (Weiss 126). At the end of the play Weiss also provides a list of the defendants by number and the trial or trials in which each was prosecuted (297-8). During the play, however, it is up to the viewer (or reader) to remember which defendant is facing a particular accusation from any one of the witnesses. The audience's inevitable confusion about the identity of the defendants strategically parallels the uncertainty of the witnesses who struggle to identify the perpetrators years after they last saw them. The fifth witness explains: "when I look at their faces / I find it hard to tell / whether I recognize them or not / But that man there [Dr. Capesius] looks familiar to me" (126). After Dr. Capesius denies being present at the selections, the sixth witness takes the stand and declares that he had known Dr. Capesius in his hometown before the war (126). During cross-examination Dr. Capesius flatly denies knowing the sixth witness (127). For the

witnesses who saw their oppressors every day during their time in Auschwitz, the denials by the defendants must have been very frustrating, and Weiss clearly empathizes with their frustration and moves his audience to do so too by contrasting the cumulative credibility of the witnesses' testimony with the shifty self-apologetic retorts of the defendants.

As a witness to the society of the Blessed, Dante is occasionally frustrated by his inability to recognize the faces of individual souls or to remember their precise identities. The third circle of the Wise, for instance, flashes before his eyes and fades out before he can identify a single soul sparkling in it (*Par.* 14.73-8). Despite these perceptual failures—or rather because he owns up to them—his cumulative testimony has the ring of truth about it. At least that's what Dante-poet urges us to conclude from our empathy with the pilgrim during his blackouts. Similarly Weiss urges us to trust the witnesses because we can empathize with their struggle to recall faces and name names against the overwhelming darkness of their experiences. Rewarded with beatific vision in the Empyrean, Dante is finally able to see all the Blessed with superhuman acuity. It is his reward for struggling patiently for so long to surmount his perceptual and intellectual limitations in the quest for Truth. While Weiss cannot bestow beatific vision on his audience, his alignment of the play with the third cantica deflects anger away from the forgetful witnesses onto the defendants who deny their involvement in the Holocaust. The paradisial promise of clarified vision encourages the investigators in their quest to discover what truly happened at Auschwitz and what it ultimately means above and beyond the painful muddle of the judicial process.

Who has the last word in *Die Ermittlung*? Surprisingly, for all his empathy with the witnesses and the victims, Weiss ends his play on a downbeat with a self-exonerating homily delivered by Defendant One on the dismissively anodyne theme of "life goes on":

> All of us
> I want to make that very clear
> did nothing but our duty
> even when that duty was hard
> and even when it grieved us to do it
> Today
> when our nation has worked its way up
> after a devastating war
> to a leading position in the world
> we ought to concern ourselves
> with other things [.] (296)

According to the stage directions, this speech is to be followed by "loud approbation from the defendants" (296). Though Weiss is primarily concerned with the words of the witnesses as they struggle to establish the facts about Auschwitz, the long trial ironically culminates in an absurd round of applause from the defendants: a signal not only of their approval of the final speech but also of their mocking disdain for all the speeches of the witnesses. Just as Dante-poet plunges the pilgrim back into the whorl of the Fallen World at the end of *Paradiso*, so Weiss seems to cast himself (and his audience) back into the normal workaday world of post-War Germany. Will a wilful ignorance, a strategic failure of memory, bring the grand project of the investigation to a sorry end? Dante too confronted a catastrophic loss of words and memories at the very moment of divine union:

> Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
> che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,
> e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.
>
> [From that time on my power of sight exceeded
> that of speech, which fails at such a vision,
> as memory fails at such abundance.] (*Par*. 33.55-7)

While the witnesses will not see justice done during the trial or their cause dramatically advanced in the Hereafter by celestial ministers rallied by the Divine Judge, Weiss nevertheless deploys his paradisial model for bathetic effect against the puffed-up arrogance of Defendant One and his chortling claque. The end of *Paradiso* is the momentous beginning of the Poem. If a momentous discourse about truth and justice should surge forth from the open end of *Die Ermittlung*, it could not be halted by the sneering laughter of the World or constrained within the narrow limits of the Theatre.

Nevertheless, the elimination of sentencing from the play prevents the audience from jumping to the hasty conclusion that all the defendants are equally villainous or blameworthy. The investigation must go on—even as life must go on. According to Jurgen Schlunk, "Weiss does not allow his readers to transfer the blame on the executioners automatically; instead, he suggests that the arbitrary nature of the Nazi system appointed some inmates to be prisoners and others to be guards, but that in individual cases, it could just as well have been the other way around" (23). While the dialogue in the play clearly distinguishes the witnesses from the defendants, Weiss suggests that before the war started and Auschwitz was opened, the defendants could easily have become the witnesses and vice versa. Reflecting on the ethical implications of his controversial decision to name the defendants but not the witnesses, he expresses anxious concern that "the bearers of these names [the defendants] should not be accused once again in this drama" (Weiss 119). If the defendants are not to be accused again, why are they in the play at all? Perhaps their paradisial function is to serve as mouthpieces for the peculiar mentality of the designers and perpetrators of Auschwitz. Their testimony is a potential source of truth about the camp. As such, it cannot be simply dismissed or

discounted. Dante's saints often reflect on their moral failings and testify to the depraved social or political conditions under which they lived. The roles of sinner and saint are oddly reversible in some cases. Cunizza, for instance, finds herself among the saints in the Third Heaven even though on earth she was a promiscuous adulteress raised in "la terra prava" [the degenerate land] of Italy (*Par.* 9.25). Thanks to her miraculous elevation to Paradise, she can now look back objectively on the depraved environment of her sinful life. There but for the grace of God, indeed. Now there can be no confusing interchangeability between the Saved and the Damned. If the witnesses and the defendants were once confusingly interchangeable in the early days of the Third Reich, they are so no longer. At least not from Weiss's long-range paradisial perspective in *Die Ermittlung*. While the defendants are free to damn themselves in the play, they are not set up as straw dogs for ritual attack. They are allowed to pass judgment on the witnesses even as the witnesses testify to their depravity.

At several key moments in the play the witnesses struggle to explain how the rules in Auschwitz made them both participants in and victims of the Nazi system of destruction. According to the fifth witness,

> It was normal
> that everything had been stolen from us
> It was normal
> that we stole too . . .
> And it was normal
> that there were some among us
> who helped those who stood over us
> to beat us [.] (145)

Even the witnesses seem to understand that during their time in Auschwitz the normal rules of right or wrong were suspended. Twenty years later, in the Frankfurt trials, they continue to struggle with the disparity between the "normal" world of moral distinctions

in which they now abide and that other world, the disordered realm of the camps. Like Cacciaguida, who is only able to speak objectively about his own history from the external vantage-point of Paradise, the witnesses also need distance—in space as well as in time—to look back on their lives with objective equanimity and confront their forced role in the persecution.

Weiss's trumpeted emphasis on anonymity and factuality only underscores his struggle to set himself at a distance from his own characters, to find some objective position from which to judge their conformity to the evil order of the camps. In a few cases he changes the words of a witness in order to remove any trace of guilt from the testimony. During the actual trials, as Bosmajian discovered, one witness clearly recalled how a Jewish prisoner had cooperated with one of the defendants, Kaduk, in the murder of a fellow Jew:

> "He told the second one, the Jew, to lie on his back. Kaduk placed the blood-spoiled iron across the neck and stood at one end. A prisoner had to stand at the other. Thus the man was strangled." Weiss omits the reference to the other prisoner and thereby also omits the guilty relationship between oppressors and oppressed. (174)

Though the fifth witness in the play concedes that it was common for a prisoner to act as an abuser, Weiss downplays the twisted intimacy between the oppressed and their oppressors—and the guilt arising from it—for the sake of drawing a clear moral line between the witnesses and the defendants. It is a paradisial move on his part, a dramatic transcendence of the historical fact that the roles were often interchangeable. The third witness even insists on distinguishing the different types of Nazis who were responsible for killings in the camp:

> Dr. Shatz and Dr. Frank . . .
> did not kill out of hatred
> or conviction

> They killed only because they had to
> and it was hardly worth talking about
> Only a few killed with passion [.] (Weiss 179)

The witnesses struggle to sustain such nice distinctions so that the public who did not experience Auschwitz will come to understand their moral predicament. Yet if the murder of one inmate "was hardly worth talking about," why bother crying out for justice after the execution of millions? Weiss is unable to come up with a simple answer to this overwhelming question, and since his investigation never becomes a full-fledged theodicy, he simply passes over the problem of guilt whenever the roles of witness and defendant are blurred in the court records.

Perhaps a final answer to the question could only be supplied to his literary imagination through the impassioned theodicy behind the allegorization of justice in *Paradiso*. The human will is naturally inclined to rise to the heavens "though violence may force it down a thousand times," as Beatrice teaches Dante in her lecture on why nuns who break their vows of chastity and obedience may still be deemed worthy of sainthood (*Par*. 4.76-8). Just as the third witness notes that most Nazis did wrong out of a misguided sense of duty, their wills having been forced down by the violence of an evil system, so Beatrice would have Dante understand that the nuns in the First Heaven were coerced into breaking their vows by the matrimonial pressures of the Italian class system. The degree of guilt is therefore relative to the weakness or strength of an individual will, and often that degree (so dependent on the psychological and social circumstances of the wrongdoer) cannot be easily assessed from the external vantage-point of a human judge.

Die Ermittlung attempts to analyse what justice is and how much war criminals feel twenty years after the war has finished, especially when memories begin to fade and horrors become blurred by the passage of time. The Frankfurt trials sought to bring to

light the different experiences of Auschwitz, without the same concern with justice as the Nuremburg trails or the Eichmann trial. In the end, Weiss stuck by his decision not to use his play to reaccuse the defendants or to make heroes out of the witnesses. *Die Ermittlung* is responsible for bringing the condensed words of hundreds of witnesses to the attention of a large public and to make them aware of the failings of the judicial system for something as large as the Holocaust. While the horrors of Auschwitz seem only to apply to *Inferno*, the hope and objectivity found in *Paradiso* sustained Weiss's project of investigating the Holocaust without drawing hasty conclusions about its cause or facile lessons from its moral conundrums. Weiss relies on Dante's representation of a divinely sustained justice system in *Paradiso* to expose the failings of the German judicial system and to suggest different ways in which the Auschwitz Trial can be viewed as a provisional judgment on the defendants, even if their actual sentencing failed to provide the apocalyptic satisfaction of a truly Dantean *contrapasso*.

CONCLUSION

A Return from the Abyss

If Levi, Wajda, and Weiss share any narratological insight about the Holocaust, it is an impassioned sense of the survivors' resistance to every predictable or permanent sort of closure. Whether the Holocaust is represented as a Big Story to be punily denied or as a dense skein of conflicting tales in which fact and fiction cannot be easily distinguished or truth simply affirmed, the compulsive desire to stop thinking and talking and writing about it appears to be doomed to frustration by a commonly understood (though rarely explicit) speech-act of defying the murderous silence that once enveloped the camps.

No talking cure can bring on a permanently therapeutic end to personal obsessions with the dehumanizing minutiae of camp life or to the guilt-ridden questions racked up inside the minds of survivors, as Levi bleakly demonstrates in his memoir. He simply breaks his story off, like a branch from an impossibly gnarly thorn-tree. The final sentence of *Se Questo È un Uomo* reads like a painful truncation despite its frail slivers of hope: "Arthur ha raggiunto felicemente la sua famiglia, e Charles ha ripreso la sua professione di maestro; ci siamo scambiati lunghe lettere e spero di poterlo ritrovare un giorno" (*Se Questo* 153) [Arthur has reached his family happily and Charles has taken up his teacher's profession again; we have exchanged long letters and I hope to see him again one day] (Woolf 173). A happy ending? Hardly. But neither is it a tragic anagnorisis. Preceding this deceptively cheery, offhandedly domestic sign-off is a bathetic description of the arrival of the Russian troops to Auschwitz with a clinical report totting up who died and who survived with him in the hospital during the final ten days before liberation. Any note of celebration in his voice is dampered by his uncertainty

about seeing his friend Charles again or about re-entering the kind of normal social life such a sentence would typically imply.

Like Levi, Wajda refuses to resolve his vision of foiled deliverance from the Nazi death-machine into any kind of moral certainty about the resilience of the Human Spirit or the vanity of Human Wishes. Instead of closing in on a religious symbol of salvation, a church steeple off in the distance, say, or a political sign of gathering Polish strength such as a dauntless band of reinforcements marching forth to aid the weary fighters in the Uprising, the final moments of *Kanał* provoke only broodingly ironic meditations on the capture of the resistance fighters, the descent of Zadra back into the sewers, and the hapless solidity of the lovers as the filthy stream they have been following mocks their entrapment by flowing freely through the iron gate. Though Wajda hoped that his narrative of escape from Warsaw would inspire Poland to recover its long-lost sense of national unity, his film ends on a purgatorial downbeat after a series of seemingly irrevocable calamities that scatter, overwhelm, and eventually annihilate the band of never-quite-heroic fugitives.

No voice from the Holocaust sounds more frustrated by the intractable contentiousness of its aftermath than Defendant One's rasping exhalation at the end of Weiss's *Die Ermittlung*. "These recriminations / should have fallen / under the Statute of Limitations / a long time ago," he bitterly complains (296), but no neat legal stratagem for putting an end to the trials once and for all is provided either by the courts or by the theatre. Weiss even denies his audience the satisfaction of a climactic sense of sentencing, however strictly it was required or vindictively expected at the end of the actual trials. The highly regulated ritual of charging and testifying in the dramatized *Auschwitz-Prozess* is rudely interrupted by "loud approbation" from the defendants—a

disruption of the order of the court—which strangely pre-empts (even as it stridently prompts) the audience's impulse to honour the age-old theatrical ritual of applauding the players at the end of their performance. When even ritual endings fail to bring the relief of closure, Weiss suggests, what we may be facing in the long run is the perplexing possibility that the Holocaust is not an open-ended story at all but an unendable or never-ending one.

It is a possibility anticipated by Dante at the alpha-and-omega ending of the *Commedia*. At the omega point in the third cantica, the pilgrim achieves his long-term goal of divine union with its surprise coda, the inspirational reprise of the Spiration in the transfer of the grand "forma" of the Poem onto the receptive "materia" in the Poet's mind. But this ultimate climax is also the alpha point in the generation of the *Commedia*: its potential for reforming the world can only be realized when the Poet returns to his temporal consciousness in the Dark Wood (again) and begins to retrace his steps back to God. The retracing is helicoidal rather than strictly circular since each return to God is a unique experience, just as each reading and rereading of the Poem brings fresh understandings of its universalizing design. As long as the sun and the other stars whirl out the cycles of time, the regenerative impact of the Poem on the world will be never-ending in accordance with the Divine Plan. And since its Formal Cause is the all-encompassing circle of the Divine Mind itself, the operations of the Poem are ultimately eternal and therefore unendable. That's the paradisial way of interpreting Dante's double closure, his twinning of anagogy and catagogy in the high fantasy of poetic cosmogenesis.

It may also be read, of course, in an infernal way. The Poet's bewildering loss of the Divine Presence, the sudden inversion of his moral bearings as his soul plunges back

into the thickets of fraud and wrath and greed, is an experience never truly to be transcended in the Poem but only escaped for a while. How much darker and more savage will the "cammino alto e silestro" [deep and savage way] (*Par.* 2.142) seem to a pilgrim-reader who already knows what it leads to! And surely the savage darkness will only intensify with every return of the wayward soul to the menacing start of the *smarrimento*. Here the unendable route with its never-ending torments takes on the menace of a recurrent nightmare or an obsessive memory-lurch back to the site of unspeakable trauma. The only "Statue of Limitations" that can stop the compulsive energy of the Poem's vicious circling is the cessation of history at the crack of Doom. History, in the meantime, is ruining down into the depths of perdition.

If Levi, Wajda, or Weiss looked back to Dante for guidance in ending their narratives of the Holocaust, they most likely drew some ironic inspiration from the infernal way of reading the back-to-earth strategy of the *Commedia*. They all firmly set their narratives within history, the ruinously warring world of the modern Here and Now. Even Weiss, with his paradisial inclinations, refuses to succumb to the tempting fantasy of anagogic release from time. Like Levi and Wajda, he has no ready answers for the conundrums raised by the absurdly unfinalized "Final Solution": why some inmates survived while others perished; why some Nazis killed out of duty while others killed out of passion; why some victims colluded with their oppressors while others resisted the entire system of oppression. Common to all three retracers of the Holocaust is an openness to the *Commedia* as a source of typological parallels with powerful tropological perspectives. But even as their allusions to Ulysses or Lucy or Cacciaguida serve to map out potential domains of moral understanding onto which the muddle of political misunderstandings and distorted personal memories of the Holocaust can be projected

and even clarified, their literary or cinematic alignments with Dante do not result in the formulation of ultimate answers or the establishment of absolute certainties to end the restless process of recollecting, re-enacting, redressing.

When Levi, Wajda, and Weiss turn most compellingly to Dante, the prototypical poet of heteroglossia, it is to help them find a voice or a chorus of voices to match the specific discursive objectives of their very different projects. Their engagement with the *Commedia* as a vast echo-chamber of dramatically distinctive voices seems to have empowered their own voices or the voices of their characters—Levi sounding through Ulysses, Michał reciting like Casella, Weiss's witnesses speaking truth like the chorus of the Just—when what they had to say might easily have been lost amid the din of denials and dismissals stirred up after the War. Dante had famously made his own voice heard above the slanders of his false friends and political enemies, and his astounding success in making his "dolce melodia" (even with its "senso duro") resound through the centuries—despite his identity-annihilating exile—can only have boosted the morale of modern exiles seeking to unlock their tongues and sharpen their visions of what had happened in the Warsaw Ghetto or behind the barricades at Auschwitz. Though Levi, Wajda, and Weiss never presumed to speak as the New Dante for the Modern Age, they all used the Old Dante as a time-tested amplifier of their outrage against injustice.

Throughout *Se Questo È un Uomo*, as the title itself would have us predict, Levi broods over the Dantean (and Augustinian and Aristotelian and Mosaic) questions of what constitutes the essence of human nature. It is usually framed as an old-fashioned scholastic question for first-year philosophy students, the ready-made answer being "rationality." While Aristotle's Man was a rational animal, Dante's spin on the ready-made answer— "compagnevole animale" [companiable animal] (*Convivio* 4.4) —reveals

his convivial belief that human nature cannot be rational unless it is sociable. For a survivor of Auschwitz, however, the definition of human nature had once been and must forever be an anxious concern at the deepest level of social and personal identity formation. Only in the last chapter of the memoir does Levi permit himself to ponder the evidence for a nature once human but reduced by the antisocial society of the camps to a status lower than subhuman. What constitutes the essence of *inhuman* nature? His answer is far from abstract:

> È uomo chi uccide, è uomo chi fa o subisce ingiustizia; non è uomo chi, perso ogni ritegno, divide il letto con un cadavere. Chi ha atteso che il suo vicino finisse di morire per togliergli un quarto di pane, è, pur senza sua colpa, piú lontano dal modello dell'uomo pensante, che il piú rozzo pigmeo e il sadico piú atroce. (*Se Questo* 152)
>
> [It is man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice; it is no longer man who, having lost all restraint, shares his bed with a corpse. Whoever waits for his neighbour to die in order to take his piece of bread is, albeit guiltless, further from the model of thinking man than the most primitive pigmy or the most vicious sadist.] (Woolf 171-2)

By surviving Auschwitz, by being in the Ka-Be at the end of the war, and by forming a friendship with Charles, Levi sets himself apart from the prisoner who "divide il letto con un cadavere" or "ha atteso che il suo vicino finisse di morire per togliergli un quarto di pane." This separation allows Levi to remain as the "uomo pensante." Dante-poet identifies himself also as a "uomo pensante" when, at the beginning of *Inferno*, he describes how he could not climb the hill because of a weak left foot. The left foot represents the will in Augustinian psychology whereas the right foot represents the intellect (Singleton 9). While Dante's will is in need of help, his intellect remains intact, and since he never loses "il ben de l'intelletto" [the good of the intellect] (*Inf.* 3.18), he can travel through the afterlife as a "uomo pensante" and return to give a trustworthy account of his experiences. Levi's fervent identification with Dante's sociable "thinking

man" must have affected his reading of *Inferno*, highlighting for him the many passages where the pilgrim is forced to confront, as a transfixed eye-witness, the transformation of the Damned into creatures less than human. While it is ultimately Levi who finds his own voice and expresses his own thoughts on what a man is and is not within the destruction system of the Nazi regime, his testimony draws on Dante's hyperbolic examples of degenerate humanity (such as Nimrod or Myrrha) in order to construct more credible images of demolished men and women from his memories of the inhuman "society" of Auschwitz.

The Dantean voice Wajda takes from the *Commedia* is not that of a philosopher concerned with the destruction of the man's soul or will, but that of a political activist or prophet preoccupied with national unity and social reform. Dante meditates frequently on the political state of Italy and Florence and how the city and country are slowly being destroyed by internal and external enemies. He warns the reader through his political laments about the factionalization of civic life that Italy is headed for certain destruction unless concord can be established between Church and Empire. Wajda cannot rewrite history; the Warsaw Uprising was not successful. He chose to present this failure in the final scenes of *Kanał* when the members of the platoon do not successfully escape the sewers. According to Michałek, Wajda's films "tried to mesh individual experience with the mechanism of the community's destinies and, in doing so, carved out a new place for the cinema" (13). Wajda's hopes for national unity led him to remind Poland (where the *Commedia* is routinely taught to school children) that Dante had anticipated not only his call for resistance to brutal imperialism but also his vision of a successful nation where justice would ensure the reign of peace. Hence the purgatorial glimmers of hope that shine through the darkness of the sewers: if the fugitives can see the light even at the

point of death—as Manfred and Buonconte did on their remote battlefields—then surely the Poles will not succumb to despair in the aftermath of their failed Uprising.

Weiss's choice to structure *Die Ermittlung* after *Paradiso* seems the most problematic of the three engagements with the *Commedia* considered in this study. When Weiss's concern for justice is taken into account, however, the choice of *Paradiso* is no longer so difficult to understand. Weiss explained at the beginning of the play that it was not meant as a further way to condemn the defendants: they had already been sentenced. The success of *der Auschwitz-Prozess* itself was far from assured, however, and the defendants often received minor sentences which hardly seemed to fit either the startling number or the heinous character of their crimes. *Paradiso* is one long meditation on justice: who should administer it; how it should be administered; and how much of it should be served on earth and beyond. Weiss adopts the voice of Dante-poet not just to raise these questions, but to investigate and ascertain the long-range significance of the *Prozess* even when its short-term success was proving dubious at best. While the defendants are given the last word in the play and laugh mockingly at the witnesses, Weiss suggests that the defendants will have to answer for their crimes again in another world, a world more equipped to deal with the perpetrators of genocide. Perhaps that world will be only an imaginary one, a provisional theatrical space, rather than a gloriously revealed Empyrean; but at least it will be opened up as a realm where the quest for justice cannot be shut down by an arbitrary Statute of Limitations.

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